Ken Burns's Assault on Jazz LEON WIESELTIER

The Great American Gun Myth JACKSON LEARS

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THE NEW REPUBLIC

NUARY 22, 2001

WHAT WENT RIGHT

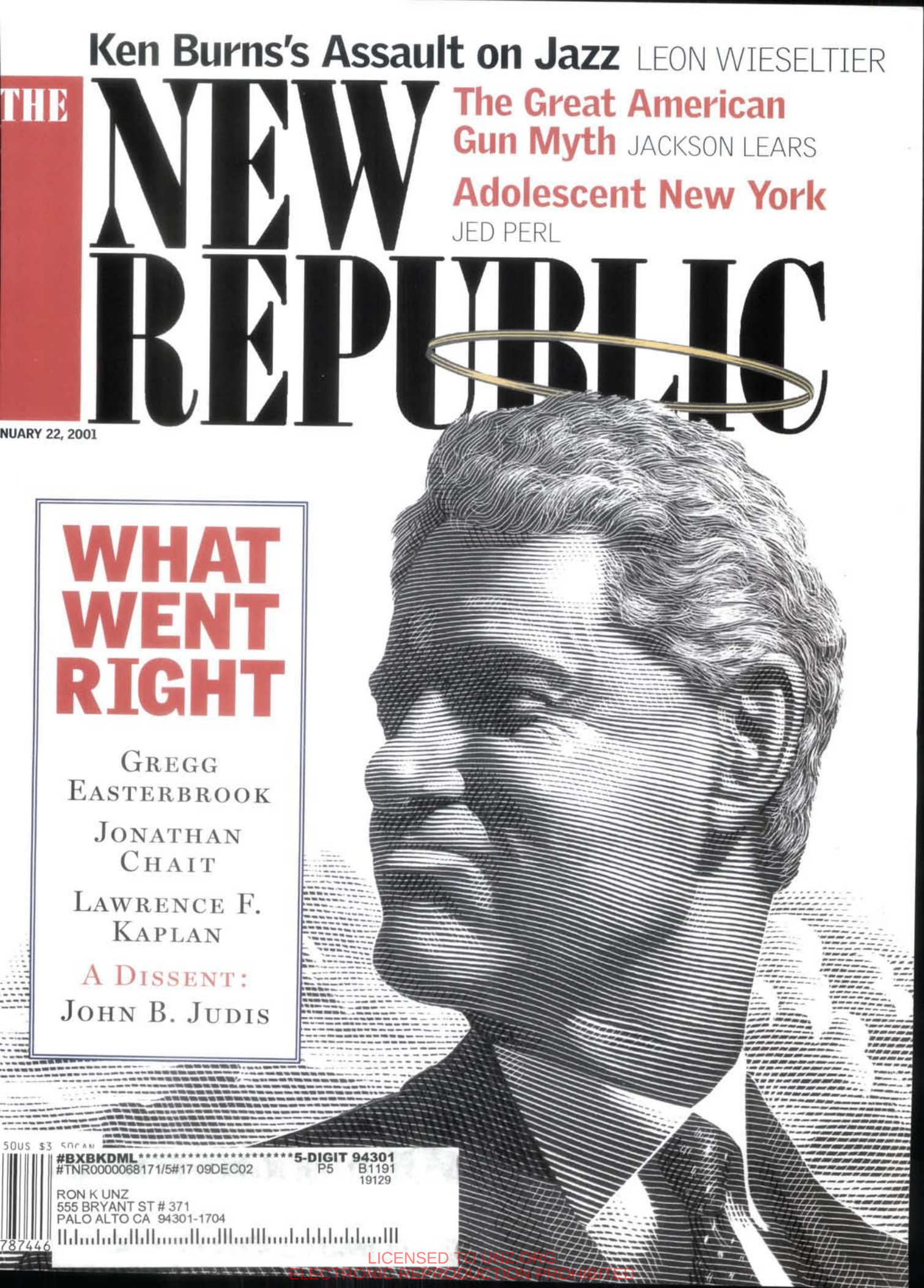
GREGG EASTERBROOK

JONATHAN CHAIT

LAWRENCE F. KAPLAN

A DISSENT:

JOHN B. JUDIS



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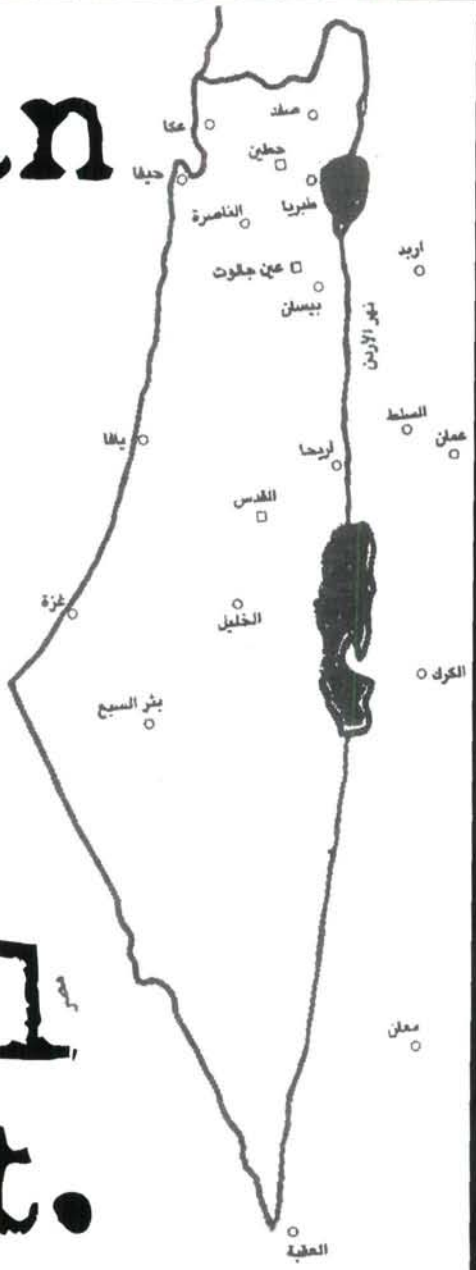
Palestinian maps consider all of Israel an illegal settlement.



As just one of many examples, on page 64 of the official Palestinian 5th grade schoolbook entitled, "Our Arabic Language" #542, the map of Palestine includes the following "settlements": Haifa, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Ashkelon, Safed, Beersheba, Eilat and everything in between.

Beyond the schools, in the words of the official preacher of Al Aksa mosque appointed by chairman Arafat and the Palestinian Authority: "The Islamic land of Palestine is one and indivisible. There is no difference between Haifa and Nablus, between Lod and Ramallah, between Jerusalem and Nazareth, between Gaza and Ashkelon" (Palestinian Television, Sept 8, 2000).

Which brings up the question: Is the real obstacle to peace the Israeli settlements, or is it the official Palestinian Authority teaching that *all of Israel is an illegal settlement?*

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CORRESPONDENCE

Hysterical scapegoating

TO THE EDITORS:

Franklin Foer describes me as a Green and a "vocal Nader admirer" in his jeremiad "Mourning After" (December 11). Did Foer bother to read anything I wrote about the election?

Early in the fall, on *Salon.com,* I urged prospective Ralph Nader voters to consider the consequences for civil rights and civil liberties of a George W. Bush victory, and I wrote harshly of Nader's dismissal of those concerns. The week before Election Day, I reiterated that for those reasons, among others, I intended to vote for Al Gore.

Maybe Foer is confused because I also wrote that hysterical scapegoating of Nader—an authentic American hero—isn't justified. You needn't be a Nader voter to see Gore's defeat as his own—just as you needn't be a Gore voter to see democracy endangered by the suppression of Miami ballots.

BRUCE SHAPIRO
Contributing Editor
The Nation
National Correspondent
Salon.com
New Haven, Connecticut

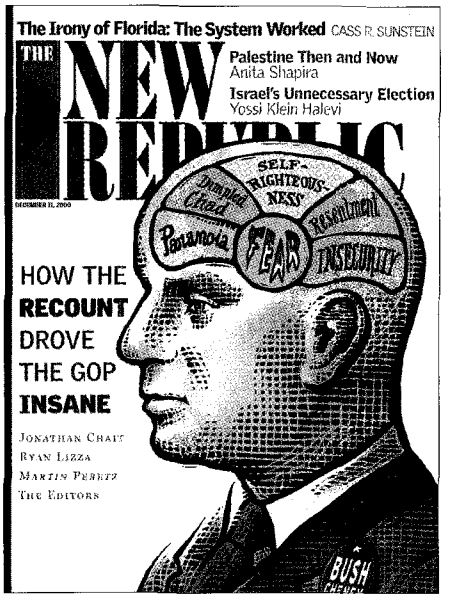
FRANKLIN FOER REPLIES:

I never identified Bruce Shapiro as a member of the Green Party, though I did call him a "vocal Nader admirer." Judging from his response, he remains one.

Reform schools

TO THE EDITORS:

Alan Wolfe's critique of "progressive" education, in his review of Diane Ravitch's book *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms,* is mostly on target ("Subject Matter Matters," December 11). But he misses one important progressive argument against it. From character educators on the right to multiculturalists on the left, most professional educators seem to think that schools should emphasize "good values" instead of "mere knowledge." Yet good values occur in equal measure across the social structure: The poor and the rich have the same amount of honesty and duplicity, kindness and cruelty, tolerance and bigotry, and so on. By contrast, knowledge is distributed unequally: The more money you amass, the more likely you are to understand science, math, history, geography, and so forth. Last time I checked, American progressives were supposed to care about narrowing the gap between the haves and the



have-nots. That principle would require them to demand more attention to traditional disciplinary knowledge, especially in poorer communities. Share the wealth!

JONATHAN ZIMMERMAN
Director
History of Education Program
New York University
New York, New York

TO THE EDITORS:

Alan Wolfe agrees with Diane Ravitch's premise, writing that nothing is "as thoroughly failed as the American public school system." Yet in *Shrub,* a critical look at the political record of George W. Bush, Molly Ivins writes that the Texas public education system "rocketed from abysmal to pretty damn good in just 30 years," and other states may have had similar experiences (although it could be argued that public education in California and New York, along with the so-called "Great City Schools," went from pretty damn good to abysmal in the same time period). We have not experienced a century of failed school reform; rather, we have experienced a century that featured the *invention* of the American public school. Sure, there have been wrong turns, false starts, and boneheaded detours. And Ravitch is correct to warn us away from anything proclaiming to be a new movement in public education. But you can't reform something that doesn't yet exist, and the American public school system didn't exist in its present, nearly universal, egalitarian, post-*Brown* incarnation until very late in the twentieth century.

The fatal flaw in Ravitch's book and Wolfe's review of it is both writers' excessive reliance on artificial binary oppositions, such as the impossible choice between phonics and whole language. What good is phonics without whole language? What good is whole language without phonics? These false binaries also lead Ravitch and Wolfe to founder on the shoals of conspiracy theories and demonization, Wolfe conjuring up plots by the monolithic "self-interested, narrow-minded, politically biased, intellectually mediocre, and anti-democratic (educational) establishment." Wolfe writes this just five paragraphs after acknowledging that education is a hotly contested issue with odd alliances, including "hippies and conservative Christians in favor of home schooling, African Americans and white Catholics in favor of vouchers, old-fashioned leftists and political conservatives in favor of standards, multiculturalists and advertisers in favor of 'relevance.'" Since the members of the educational establishment, myself included, fit into several of those categories, we might ask whether Wolfe should really be permitted to boil water and freeze it at the same time.

THOM PRENTICE, PH.D.
Assistant Professor of Education
Southwest Texas State University
San Marcos, Texas

TO THE EDITORS:

Alan Wolfe's review of Diane Ravitch's *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* contains some inaccuracies. Wolfe writes: "As late as December 1999, the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English formally opposed phonics instruction." Actually, NCTE passed a resolution on phonics in 1997. It reads: "Resolved that the National Council of Teachers of English declare that reading is a complex process of constructing meaning; that phonics for beginning as well as experienced readers is only one part of the complex, socially constructed, and cognitively demanding process called reading; that all readers need to learn a range of reading strategies, including phonics."

The resolution to which Wolfe may be referring was passed at NCTE's annual convention in November 1999, and it addressed governmental intrusion: "Resolved that the National Council of Teachers of English declare that neither Congress nor any state legislative body should mandate, recommend, or support a particular approach or methodologies for teaching reading and the other language arts in classrooms and teacher preparation programs." The resolution continues by affirming the need for local control and teacher professionalism in

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making instructional decisions. The word "phonics" does not appear anywhere in the resolution, though the background statement preceding it does refer to phonics, citing as an example of inappropriate governmental intrusion a failed bill (H.Con.Res.214) mandating that "systematic phonics instruction should be used in all schools as a first and essential step in teaching a student to read." To describe this resolution as formally opposing phonics instruction is to engage in serious misreading.

Wolfe goes on to assure his audience that Ravitch is "no scorched-earth traditionalist." Then he writes: "She does not oppose the whole-language approach: in her view, students need to learn both phonics and efforts at reading comprehension." I do not know what it means for students to learn "efforts at reading comprehension," but I assume it is a way of acknowledging that reading involves more than phonics. There, at least, Wolfe makes an accurate statement, one with which NCTE agrees entirely.

ANNE RUGGLES GERE
President
National Council of Teachers of English
Urbana, Illinois

ALAN WOLFE REPLIES:
Let THE NEW REPUBLIC's readers decide for themselves whether a resolution that describes reading as a "socially constructed" process and insists that teachers know best, followed two years later by another resolution directed explicitly against efforts on the part of legislators to emphasize phonics, is or is not a resolution opposing phonics instruction. "Reading comprehension," by the way, means the ability to understand a text.

Iraqi opposition

TO THE EDITORS:
In his October 30 article on U.S. Iraq policy ("Rollback"), and then in a December 11 response to a letter regarding it, Lawrence F. Kaplan claims that Kenneth A. Pollack, the Clinton administration's National Security Council Middle East director, "touted Iraq's military prowess in the run-up to the Gulf war." I did not know Pollack before the Gulf war, but this characterization runs counter to my impression of his view of the Iraqi military, based on my supervision of his work as a research fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy in 1997–1998 and my past reading of his doctoral dissertation. While I disagree strongly with certain statements and policies Pollack advocated, especially regarding the appropriateness of supporting the Iraqi opposition, I do not recall him ever extolling Iraq's military capabilities. On the contrary, I remember him as being quite dismissive of Iraq's alleged military "prowess."

ROBERT B. SATLOFF
Executive Director
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy
Washington, D.C.

Deprogram

TO THE EDITORS:
Ronnie Dugger appears to claim that corruptible programmers may be the single largest threat to a system of voting by computer ("Rage Against the Machine," December 4). However, this problem has a relatively simple solution. The National Science Foundation or another funding agency could simply sponsor a project to create open-source voting software to be run on open-source platforms such as FreeBSD or Linux. That way, each party could easily inspect, with the help of readily available experts, whether the code was doctored. (The inspection does not involve reading every line of code, but rather simply verifying that a checksum of the compiled code in machine-readable form agrees with the expected outcome.) The touch-screen hardware necessary to build voting machines may have been relatively exotic at one time, but it is now readily available from various companies.

HENNING SCHULZRINNE
New York, New York

Justice

TO THE EDITORS:
There is no justice in the world if Tom Toles's "Bing!" cartoon does not win a Pulitzer Prize (Notebook, December 11). I laughed until I cried, then cried when I realized the implications of what I was laughing at, then took another look and laughed again. Bravo, Tom. You nailed it!

JAMES W. LEUTGENS
Nashville, Tennessee

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TRB

FROM WASHINGTON

Lock in the Cabinet

IF I WERE a liberal Democratic activist, what would be the most effective way for me to discredit the notion of a new, compassionate, inclusive conservatism? Make Jesse Helms George W. Bush's secretary of state? Put Phyllis Schlafly in charge of the Department of Health and Human Services? Deport all illegal aliens within one year? Repeal the Voting Rights Act? Or nominate John Ashcroft to be attorney general?

Tough call. Ashcroft is about as good as it gets for the polarizing purposes of the cultural wars. The special interest left has been given the post-Christmas present of its dreams. NARAL's fund-raising department is probably only now recovering from its post-nomination champagne blowout. Ralph Neas must already have sent out several million direct-mail letters. Elizabeth Birch of the Gore campaign—I mean the Human Rights Campaign—must be thrilled to bits. Not since Matthew Shepard was murdered has her direct mail been so lucrative.

It takes only a brief foray into Ashcroft's record to see why. Asked once whether he thought the law should legislate morality, Ashcroft replied, "I think *all we should legislate is morality.*" Ashcroft would make all abortion illegal, unless the life of the mother was at stake. He is queasy about the presence of openly gay people in public life, and he spearheaded the opposition to James Hormel's appointment as ambassador to Luxembourg because Hormel is openly gay. Luxembourg! No one can accuse the man of taking his eye off the ball. Ashcroft has an honorary degree from Bob Jones University, which proclaims virulent anti-Catholic bigotry and until very recently barred interracial dating. He has given a supportive interview to *Southern Partisan* magazine, a journal not known for embracing multiculturalism. And he has never shown even the slightest qualm about the state-sanctioned murder of criminals. Maybe Jesse Helms is a more polarizing and divisive figure. Or Pat Buchanan. Maybe.

To be sure, some of the attacks on Ashcroft are scurrilous. I've been poring over his record, and he's no racist. Yes, he opposes affirmative action and hate-crime laws. But all that means is that he's not a leftist. His demagoguing of African American Judge Ronnie White's nomination to federal district court was just that—anti-crime electioneering and nothing worse. People for the American Way is trying to dredge up the notion that he's also sexist, because he has opposed several women judges. But that, too, is a smear. The trouble with Ashcroft is not his alleged bigotry, and it's certainly not his personal conduct, which, by all accounts, is exemplary. The trouble is his political views, which place him at the furthest edges of rightist irredentism. He makes Pat Robertson look like a bleeding-heart liberal.

Should that be enough to scuttle his nomination? The first thing to say is that, were the shoe on the other foot, Ashcroft would be at the forefront of the campaign against such a nominee. A signal theme of Ashcroft's career has been his diligence in vetting judicial and political nominees, even minor ambassadorial appointments, to advance his ideology. Ask White and Hormel, among many, many others. With Hormel, Ashcroft didn't limit himself to concerns about competence or qualifications. His objection was purely and simply that Hormel was honest about his sexual orientation. I'm not sure what the definition of bigotry is, but it surely comes close to the line when you say that someone's sexual orientation is in itself grounds for governmental discrimination.

On the other hand, one of the consequences of winning an election is that you get to pick who's in your Cabinet. Ongoing Democratic fulminations notwithstanding, Bush won the election. His narrow victory certainly hems him in a little. But it shouldn't be used to deny him the same right all presidents have—in particular, the right to appoint to his Cabinet whomever he sees fit. Sure, appointments to the Supreme Court, the third branch of government, should be made with more consideration for the sensibilities of the Senate. But a president's own Cabinet picks should be given the benefit of most doubts. The criteria should be competence and a clean record—period. Yes, the Justice Department is an important institution, especially now that the independent-counsel statute has bitten the dust. But no one has provided solid grounds for believing that Ashcroft would not take his job as enforcer of the law and the Constitution seriously. Indeed, the man's very uptightness is reason to think he would probably be less corruptible than many others.

Which brings me to the faint promise of Ashcroft's appointment. He represents, for good and ill, an important segment of this nation: the religious right. *No one's religious faith should bar him* or her from public office, and the passion of Ashcroft's Pentecostalism is no less acceptable than, say, the piety of Joseph Lieberman. Ashcroft has publicly said he will keep his sectarian bias in check. "It is against my religion to impose my religion on others," he once said. (Notice, however, that he didn't say he wouldn't happily impose his *morality* on others.) Moreover, it is healthy for this particular group of Americans, whose paranoia has grown apace these last eight years, to be more integrated in our public life, not ostracized or marginalized. Diversity in its best and broadest sense should mean not merely racial bean-counting but the inclusion of a spectrum of religious faiths in government. If confirmed, Ashcroft will be easily the most prominent Pentecostal in public life. How he conducts himself will therefore be a fascinating test. Can he leave his religious convictions behind and apply the law without fear or favor, as John F. Kennedy once pledged to do? Or will he show that the religious right truly is a threat to the church/state divide and therefore to the freedom of all Americans?

I don't know the answer to that question, but I think it's worth finding out. Let's see if Ashcroft can rise to the occasion. If he doesn't, Bush will pay the electoral price—as well he should. The damage Ashcroft can do will be limited by an evenly divided government and by the most legitimate form of accountability our political system offers: elections. But if Ashcroft defies expectations, Bush will have done a lot to encourage the maturation of the sectarian religious right into a grown-up lobby in a diverse culture. There will be no greater lesson about the demands of pluralism and the supremacy of the law than the fact that Ashcroft will be obliged, for example, to uphold the constitutional right to abortion that he has opposed for so long. He will be forced to do what so many public officials personally opposed to the death penalty have had to do: grit his teeth and uphold a law with which he profoundly disagrees. The ancient excuse of the religious right—that they are pariahs exiled from the precincts of real power—will be forever banished. Ashcroft and his fellow Puritans will finally be forced to take yes for an answer. With any luck, they will never recover from the experience.

ANDREW SULLIVAN

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Feel Her Pain

FOR THE PAST eight years, Republicans have attacked not the politics of the Clinton administration so much as the culture of the Clinton administration. The emotional exhibitionism. The idea that intention matters more than outcome. The apology as self-promotion. The lies. And now, with Dubya not even officially in the White House, the Clintonites have a simple two-word retort: Linda Chavez.

The narcissism and duplicity of Chavez's Tuesday press conference announcing her withdrawal from consideration as labor secretary was simply staggering. First, she explained, "I have never been one who has been very public about the things I do for other people." Then she trotted out a gaggle of immigrant admirers to offer staged testimonials about her history of assisting those in need. Since one supporter couldn't make the press conference, Chavez dutifully paraphrased his praise for her work on an immigrant's behalf—in the process casually slurring a Michigan senator and a Michigan congressman, both of whom she accused of indifference to the woman's plight. Thus Chavez proved that she has a history of helping immigrants, refuting a charge no one had leveled against her and, in quintessentially Clintonian fashion, changing the subject from the specific allegations at hand to her inherent goodness as a human being.

Indeed, when pressed by reporters, Chavez gave the distinct impression that she considered those specifics a tedious irrelevance. Did she know she was hiring (and by late Tuesday even the Bush team had abandoned the absurd pretense that Marta Mercado was not Linda Chavez's employee) an illegal immigrant? "I will be very frank with you," she responded indignantly. "I think I always knew that she was here illegally. I don't check green cards when I see a woman who is battered and who has no place to live and nothing to eat and no way to get on her feet." That's a defensible position—an odd position, coming from a woman who in 1993 stated approvingly, "I think most of the American people were upset during the Zoë Baird nomination that she had hired an illegal alien," but a defensible one nonetheless. So why did Chavez say exactly the opposite to the Bush campaign—telling Bush spokesman Tucker Eskew she hadn't known Mercado was in this country illegally and thus making him complicit in her lie (sound familiar?)? And why did she tell her former neighbor (who had employed Mercado at Chavez's suggestion) that she wasn't going to raise the issue with the FBI? In another context, you might even call that obstruction of justice.

But, at her press conference, Chavez wasn't interested in such trivialities. She had a larger point to make: She was a victim. "I believe that what has happened is part of what we have seen over the last several years of the politics of personal destruction," she explained. Which would imply that Chavez spent the last several years arguing against the politics of personal destruction instead of lustily contributing to it. But, as *Slate.com* points out, Chavez has publicly referred to Bill Clinton as a "mendacious man" (April 25, 2000) and a "dangerous liar" (September 23, 1998). She trashed Baird in 1993 and again at this week's withdrawal press conference, where she pointedly referred to Baird's illegal-immigrant "chauffeur." And she has defended the Whitewater investigation, saying that the Clintons "have been very sanctimonious.... For them now to not want to have the same kind of scrutiny I think is hypocritical." Sanctimonious and hypocritical, indeed.

And Chavez, it turns out, was also the victim of a more concrete villain: the Bush transition team. In explaining how her nomination fell apart, she told CNN that "there's some inexperience in some of the [Bush] folks dealing with these things. They're not all Washington hands, and I think it could have been handled better." The problem, according to Chavez, is that because of the Florida recount, the Bushies had to vet her in record time. Perhaps if their background check had lasted more than a few days, she'd have eventually told them the truth.

Linda Chavez is right that there's nothing wrong with taking illegal immigrants into your home. We'd go further and say there's nothing wrong with giving illegal immigrants jobs. But you shouldn't exploit them. You should pay them the minimum wage and pay their Social Security taxes, so that if they ever become citizens, they can receive government benefits in their old age. Chavez did neither. What's more, rather than tell the Bush team the truth, which would perhaps have fostered an open and even valuable debate about the morality of employing illegal immigrants, she lied. And when her lies were exposed, she changed the subject, shifted the blame, and implied that her critics were coldhearted cynics. The Clinton era, it seems, is alive and well. ■

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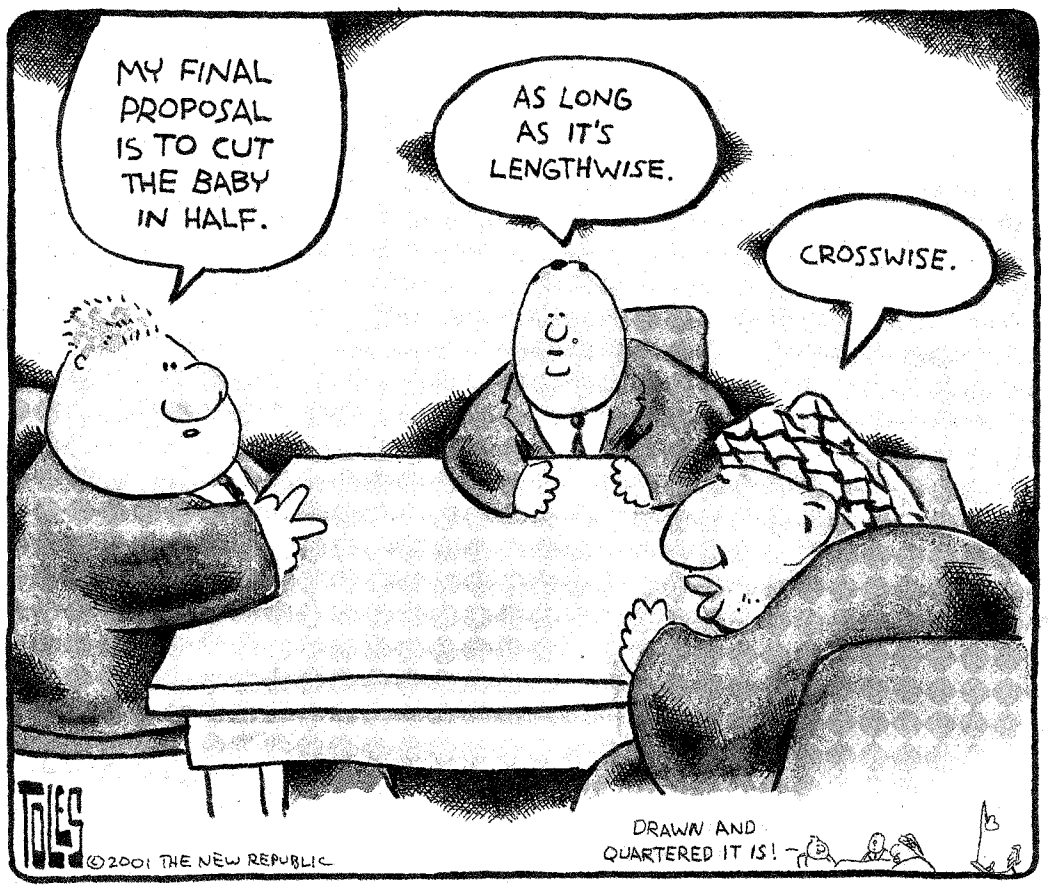
NOTEBOOK

REVELATIONS, SPIRITUAL AND PROFANE: No, we don't believe it was the Bush vetting team's fault that they didn't discover Linda Chavez's "charity" to Marta Mercado until last week, as Chavez implied. But, given Chavez's record of obfuscating her past, they should not have been surprised. Recall, if you will, Chavez's failed 1986 Maryland Senate campaign, which was characterized not only by its despicable tactics—she tried, for example, to smear her Democratic opponent, Barbara Mikulski, by implying she was a lesbian—but by Chavez's reluctance to discuss past affiliations. First there was the matter of whether she had ever been a socialist. Although Chavez acknowledged that she hadn't always been a Republican—in the 1970s, she worked for the Democratic National Committee, a Democratic congressman, and the Carter administration—she failed to mention that she had been not only a Democrat but also a member of the Young People's Socialist League in the early '70s. When confronted with this revelation, Chavez claimed her membership in the socialist group stemmed from its pro-Vietnam War stance—though there were presumably other pro-war groups that didn't require members to sign cards pledging to "reject all conceptions of minority rule such as capitalism or communism." Then there was Chavez's religion. In her campaign literature, Chavez described herself as Catholic. When a Denver rabbi said he had converted Chavez to Judaism in the late '60s, before she married her husband, Chris Gersten, Chavez categorically denied it. When the rabbi produced a conversion certificate with Chavez's signature, she conceded that before her marriage she had attended a handful of classes on Judaism. But she continued to deny the rabbi's claim that she had taken two full months of classes from him and been converted in a ceremony before the open ark of his Denver synagogue. As for the conversion document, a Chavez spokesman told *Washington Jewish Week* that it was a "revelation" to the candidate and that "she could have signed something" without knowing what it was. The revelations, it turned out, were only just beginning.

THEN AGAIN, MAYBE THE VETTING PROCESS WAS A LITTLE THIN: "From what I've read in the press accounts, [Linda Chavez is] perfectly qualified to be labor secretary."—President-elect George W. Bush, *The Dallas Morning News*, January 9

FILM NOIR: By now, we're all familiar with Jesse Jackson's penchant for hyperbole. The Florida recount, let us not forget, was all about Selma. But is *Chocolat*, the recent romantic comedy starring Juliette Binoche, really about Birmingham? Jackson offered his peculiar brand of film criticism to a *New York Times* Style section reporter following the film's New York premiere. In the film, Binoche plays a young entrepreneur who liberates a repressed French village from the moralistic tyranny of its conservative mayor—by making delicious candies. "Charming and whimsical," said Roger Ebert; "agreeably sweet," agreed *Entertainment Weekly*. Jackson disagreed. "The movie is as dramatic as November 7," he proclaimed. "[It] is really about us going to Birmingham to get the right to vote." Coming soon: why Harry Potter is really about the Freedom Rides.

JOHN MCCAIN, WE PRESUME, WILL NOT BE ATTENDING...: Remember Sam and Charles Wyly? They're the Dallas investors who, during the Republican primary, produced a dubious commercial praising W.'s environmental record. Now the Wylys have found a still stealthier way to curry favor with the new administration: They each contributed $100,000 to Bush's presidential inaugural committee. And why not? With Reagan's first inauguration in 1981, inaugural committees really ceased to be concerned with the



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inauguration. These days, they serve as clearinghouses for last-minute, regulation-free donations. Take the $100,000 contributed by Issam Fares. Fares is the Lebanese deputy prime minister who already caused a minor scandal by underwriting a speech Colin Powell delivered less than a week before the election. Republicans wailed when James Riady and other "foreign interests" helped fund Clinton's inaugural in 1993. Surely they'll react with similar outrage here. Or maybe not: Fares listed his home state as Texas.

AL GORE'S PRIVATE HELL: "New York Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton had her official swearing-in Wednesday on the Senate floor, followed by the traditional mock swearing-in in the Old Senate Chamber, where she and Vice President Gore reenacted the ceremony to allow for photographs, which are prohibited on the Senate floor. And then today came what everyone here called the 'real swearing-in'—a swinging, swaying, celebrity-studded, standing-ovation-flooded affair on the stage of Madison Square Garden's theater, with Gore again doing the honors and President Clinton telling the crowd of 2,000 in his folksiest style, 'Help my wife do a good job at what she ran for.'"—*The Washington Post*, January 8

REALITY 1, MEDIA FLACKS 0: "BUSH 'CONFIDENT' CHAVEZ WILL STAND"—*The Washington Times*, January 9

"CHAVEZ BOWS OUT AS LABOR NOMINEE"—*The Washington Times*, next day

AMONG HER OTHER QUALIFICATIONS...: "Prior to launching Potomac Hudson Group, Lorine Card was a director of MediaOne's Washington, D.C., office. In this capacity, Ms. Card was responsible for the company's federal government affairs activities and strategy, political activity, and grassroots advocacy. Card also held positions with U.S. West and Continental Cablevision. She began her career in Washington, D.C., at the White House under President Ronald Reagan before moving to New Hampshire to work in two gubernatorial administrations and serve as press secretary for a successful gubernatorial candidate."—January 9 press release announcing the launch of a new lobbying firm by Lorine Card, sister-in-law of White House Chief of Staff-designate Andrew Card

RENAISSANCE MAN: We are delighted to announce the publication of *Leonardo da Vinci*, and the casting of a genuinely fresh light upon Leonardo da Vinci, by Sherwin B. Nuland, in the Penguin Lives series. ■

BIPARTISANSHIP, CIRCA 410 A.D.

Finally, the divisive battle that has gripped our nation for months has come to an end. There can no longer be any doubt of the ultimate result: Alaric and his Visigoth horde have won, and the emperor, Flavius Honorius, has lost.

Whether or not we supported Alaric in his campaign to sack Rome, it is now our patriotic duty to rally behind him. Alaric is now the ruler of *all* Romans, not just those who smear their faces with blood and smell strongly of dung. We must all show the graciousness, good humor, and dignity that Honorius demonstrated as he fled on horseback with his servants in the dark of night.

If one thing has been proved by this long battle, it is that our system works. The Visigoths worked hard for this outcome: They pillaged our temples, burned our crops, and carried off our women. As a result, they now deserve our support, as well as our respect. Yes, some may continue to question aspects of Alaric's campaign. We have previously noted our concern about the Visigoths' strategy of stripping naked and running into battle making high-pitched screaming sounds, as well as their controversial decision to slay our elders and eat their entrails in the Forum. The Visigoths' scorched-earth strategy—and, again, we would have preferred for them to have scorched only *some* of our earth—struck many of us as overly aggressive. But, in the end, Alaric and his barbarian horde were simply using every method available to them in a flawed and often confusing process. No battle is perfect, and inevitably some children are going to be impaled on stakes and their lifeless bodies paraded through the streets. Those tactics don't make the result of this contest any less legitimate.

Now that Honorius has conceded, it is time for Rome to look to the future, not to the past. We should no longer define ourselves as either Romans or barbarians. Now we are all barbarians.

For his part, Alaric must be prepared to govern from the vital center. To begin, he needs to introduce himself more fully to the public, to allow us to see how he will lead when he is no longer wearing animal skins, shouting gibberish, and swinging a flaming club full of metal spikes. Though the battle was a close one, we must now be prepared to give Alaric our trust and our prayers as he begins to implement his stated platform: the complete destruction of our way of life and the violent transformation of our society into a primitive tribe of nomadic hunter-gatherers.

Let the healing begin.

—Stephen Sherrill and Paul Tough

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On the Hill

Color War

By MICHAEL CROWLEY

WHEN GEORGE W. BUSH nominated John Ashcroft to be his attorney general, the pundits gasped. The new administration, they warned, was putting itself on a collision course with the energized base of the Democratic Party. And they were right. But as that collision draws near, it looks increasingly likely to do some serious collateral damage—to moderate Democratic senators.

All last year, Democratic leaders worried that blacks and liberals weren't fired up. Then came Florida and the widespread perception among blacks that the Bush brothers stole the election through racial disenfranchisement. Now the base may be a little *too* fired up. Black leaders were irked that Al Gore didn't raise racial issues more in Florida. They were infuriated by President Clinton's decision to install Terry McAuliffe as head of the Democratic National Committee and are now running former Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson against him. Last week, the Congressional Black Caucus defied Majority Leader Dick Gephardt's entreaties not to contest W.'s election on the House floor and slammed Democratic senators for not joining its protest. This month, in *The Nation*, Illinois Representative Jesse Jackson Jr. writes that "liberals and progressives" have been "treated like dogs ... by a bipartisan coalition of conservative Republicans and Democrats."

Enter John Ashcroft. In the first days after his nomination, Democratic senators were clearly planning on taking a pass. The tone was restrained, even complimentary. Minnesota's Paul Wellstone said, "The ultimate decision is: Is this somebody who is qualified? Is this somebody who you believe is ethical and will work hard? And I think John, you know, can pass that test." Delaware's Joseph Biden, the top Democrat on the Judiciary Committee, said he was inclined to vote to confirm. Then they heard from the party's base—loudly. "It's clear that Democratic senators were caught off balance on this one," says a top party strategist. "I think they were unprepared for the emotions that the nomination was going to stir on the left."

Now Senate Democrats are walking on eggshells. "Contrary to what it may have seemed like he said ... the fact is he has not made a decision to support Ashcroft's nomination," says one Wellstone aide. Biden has also done a rhetorical 180-degree turn, all but saying last weekend on "Meet the Press" that he'd vote no. Echoing Biden was Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, who happens to share with Biden a well-known interest in being president one day. "If you're angling to run [for president] and you're trying to position yourself," comments one conservative lobbying for Ashcroft, "the last thing you want to do is make an enemy out of Jesse [Jackson] or Kate Michelman or any of the usual suspects." Even Robert Torricelli, who at first effused that Ashcroft represented "a very good choice," has backtracked in recent days, saying he'll vote to confirm only if Ashcroft promises continued Justice Department monitoring of racial profiling in his home state, New Jersey.

BUT WELLSTONE, BIDEN, Kerrey, and Torricelli can afford to vote no—they're from liberal states where opposing an anti-abortion, anti-gay-rights conservative doesn't pose a political threat. The left's mobilization against Ashcroft is much thornier for someone like Louisiana's Mary Landrieu, who is facing a tough reelection fight in 2002. In 1996, Landrieu squeaked into office after a recount. One reason her race was so close was lukewarm black support, which stemmed from a feud with a prominent African American leader. If Landrieu bucks Jesse Jackson and the NAACP on Ashcroft, that support may go from lukewarm to downright chilly. Says Doug Rose, a Tulane University political science professor, "She has to keep enough enthusiasm and motivation to get the turnout she needs." But if it's dangerous for Landrieu to vote for Ashcroft, it may be just as dangerous to vote against him. Democratic strategists warn that opposition could provoke Christian conservatives to work doubly hard to peel off moderate and independent white voters. One conservative group, the Issues Management Center, is already running ads warning Democratic senators to vote to confirm.

Max Cleland, a wheelchair-bound Vietnam veteran from Georgia, faces a similar dilemma. In 1996, he too won his seat with just over 50 percent of the vote—largely because blacks turned out in large numbers (they constituted one-quarter of statewide turnout), and 85 percent of them voted for him. Among whites, by contrast, he won just 38 percent. And he can't afford to see that figure slip much lower when he runs for reelection next year. "The Ashcroft nomination vote is a good test of whether Max Cleland is a new Southern Democrat or an old national Democrat," suggests Whit Ayres, who ran Cleland's opponent's campaign. "The Democrats who have been successful in Georgia have presented very moderate images and have gone out of their way not to be seen as beholden to the party's more liberal constituencies." On the other hand, Cleland surely must remember that Georgia Democrat Wyche Fowler's vote to confirm Clarence Thomas in 1991 alienated blacks and women, contributing to his defeat the following year.

Why are moderate Democrats suddenly feeling so squeezed? Partly because of the way Gore lost the election, but also because of Clinton's exit. Clinton's immense popularity among African Americans guaranteed high turnouts that helped Democratic candidates farther down the ticket. Clinton was also a master at blunting the racially polarizing issues that force Southern Democratic pols to choose between their black constituents and their white ones. With the master appeaser leaving the White House, moderate Democrats had better figure out how to walk the Ashcroft tightrope. It could be the first of many. ■

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Why label food?

Sticker Shock

By Eli Kintisch

"Americans have consistently demanded the right to know what's in their food," Senator Barbara Boxer righteously informed participants in a hearing on the labeling of genetically modified (GM) food last September. "[W]hy not tell Americans whether the ingredients in their food are natural or genetically engineered?" It's a popular plea. During the presidential campaign, both Al Gore and Ralph Nader promised mandatory labels on GM food. According to a recent Harris poll, 86 percent of Americans support the idea. "It's the very least that food producers can do," explains Craig Culp of Greenpeace. "People should be able to make informed decisions about what they eat." The argument is simple, commonsensical—and wrong. What consumers have "the right to know" is that mandatory labels for GM food would, in all likelihood, add to shoppers' confusion, as well as to their grocery bills.

When people talk about labeling GM food, they're generally thinking of the vegetable aisle of the supermarket. And if labeling simply meant putting a sticker on the genetically modified tomatoes of the future, it would make sense. But pumped-up fruits and vegetables are just the tip of the GM iceberg. Genetically engineered components—oil from GM soybeans, sugar from GM beets, flour from GM corn—also show up in lots of processed food. In fact, according to Greenpeace, they're present in more than 60 percent of the items on grocery-store shelves. (And, needless to say, they've caused no known health problems at all.) So do you slap labels on these products too? Keep in mind that while the oils, sugars, and flours in question come from genetically modified plants, the ingredients themselves usually are chemically indistinguishable from their non-GM equivalents. Complicating the issue still further are foods—such as beer, yogurt, bread, and cheese—that contain no GM ingredients at all but may be processed by genetically customized enzymes and microorganisms. Should we label these as well?

Given the quiet ubiquity of GM ingredients and processing in the food we already eat, a catchall GM label would be too broad to provide consumers with much guidance. In England, where food manufacturers began voluntarily labeling products containing GM ingredients in 1997, Jackie Dowthwaite of Britain's Food and Drink Federation says that "roughly half of the products in the supermarkets had the labels." And, just to be safe, many manufacturers labeled products as GM even if they weren't sure whether the sugar or flour or oil in them came from GM plants—thus making it impossible for consumers to make informed decisions.

Alternatively, you could label only products that contain GM substances in reasonably large doses—say, 1 percent of the combined ingredients. (This is, in fact, the standard that the 15 European Union countries—including Britain—adopted last January.) But this compromise doesn't really address the concerns that prompted the labeling movement in the first place. For activists morally opposed to "meddling" with nature, a 1 percent meddling threshold is still unacceptable. And for those truly concerned about the safety of GM food, it's not much of a safeguard. "We worry about toxic substances in foods that appear at a level of 0.00001 percent," says Joseph Hotchkiss, a professor of food science and toxicology at Cornell University.

What's more, even if labeling were required only for food modified beyond some arbitrary threshold, you'd still have the problem of manufacturers who have no idea how much GM food—if any—their products contain. As in Britain, an American manufacturer of breakfast cereal, for example, may not know where the sugars and oils in its granola come from. Commercial crops such as corn and soybeans are sold in vast quantities, with GM and non-GM plants often inadvertently mixed together. When these crops are processed into oil and other products, things become more confusing still. By the time those products reach the granola manufacturer, there's no telling whether they contain some GM substances or not. After all, soybean and corn oils extracted from GM plants are chemically identical to those from non-GM ones.

The only way to ensure that a given ingredient comes from non-GM sources would be to create separate production lines from field to factory to grocery store. This wouldn't just require additional paperwork and regulatory bureaucracy to keep the GM and non-GM streams segregated. It would require entirely new grain bins, trucks, and cleaning procedures to ensure that non-GM crops and products were not "contaminated" by GM varieties as they were harvested, stored, shipped, and processed. Joe Parcell, an economist at the University of Missouri, estimates that segregating GM and non-GM soybeans could add "up to a dollar of segregation costs" to a $5 to $6 bushel of soybeans. A study for the Canadian market by KPMG Consulting projects that such segregation would force a retail-price markup of as much as 10 percent for food containing corn, canola, and soy-based products. For crops such as corn, whose GM varieties can transmit their genes to plants in adjacent fields via pollen, the costs of segregation could be even higher. The Chicago Federal Reserve warned this year that, in addition to raising prices at the supermarket, the burden of segregating GM and non-GM crops could make "smaller and higher-cost [agriculture] firms less viable." And this burden will only grow as the food industry uses greater and greater varieties of GM ingredients.

Anti-GM activists claim that in the 1990s the food industry used a similar cost "myth" to try to avoid the standardized "Nutrition Facts" labels now on foods. But Cornell's Hotchkiss argues that GM labeling will cost "a lot more." Moreover, the cost will be borne by consumers generally, whether or not they want to avoid GM-labeled food. "The major expense is not putting the label on," says University of Saskatchewan research scientist Alan McHughen, "it's keeping it off."

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All of which points to a solution that would help consumers make informed choices, limit the confusion caused by ubiquitous labels, and raise prices only for those consumers who consider GM food a problem: voluntary, standardized labeling of food *without* GM ingredients. Only companies that wanted to label their products "GM-free" would have to pay for the attendant segregation, quality control, and verification—and they would pass those costs along to their customers. Toward this end, the Food and Drug Administration, which rejected mandatory labeling last May, is already drafting guidelines that define when manufacturers can use a "non-GM" label. And the U.S. Department of Agriculture recently announced that food labeled "organic" would not contain GM ingredients, giving consumers an additional way to choose.

A "non-GM" label has the virtue of recognizing that GM-free products are now the exception at your local supermarket, rather than the rule. Consumers willing to pay the extra cost for such specialty products would be able to do so—just as millions of Americans already buy food certified kosher or organic. Those unconcerned about genetic tinkering wouldn't have to fund an extensive labeling regime. And the market would take it from there. If, as anti-GM activists argue, a majority of shoppers would pay extra to avoid GM food, we'd find out. Fueled by consumer demand, the GM-free niche would expand until it began pushing GM food off the shelves. On the other hand, if Americans generally prefer the cost, taste, or whatever of the bioengineered food they've been eating unknowingly (and without ill effect) for years, they'd have that option as well. And evidence suggests that many would take it. Even in the midst of Britain's political firestorm over GM food, tomato paste clearly labeled PRODUCED FROM GENETICALLY MODIFIED TOMATOES sold better than its non-GM competitor in Sainsbury's supermarkets, a British chain. Why? The GM variety, says a company representative, was cheaper. ■

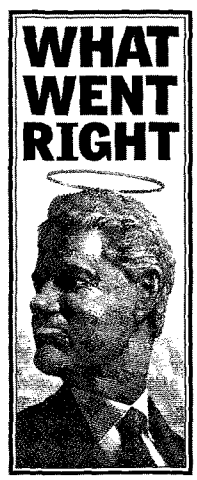
What went right.

Modest Gain

By GREGG EASTERBROOK

INCOMING ADMINISTRATIONS OFTEN say that a troubled country is in pressing need of their new philosophy of government. George W. Bush and his lieutenants say this, then offer these ideas: Shift power toward the states, improve public management, and reduce federal intrusion. But there are two fundamental problems here. First, the country isn't in trouble; over the past eight years, practically everything in the United States has improved. Second, things have improved in large part because the philosophy of government Bush advocates has already been tried—by Bill Clinton.

When President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore arrived at the White House in 1993, America faced colossal federal deficits, the impending bankruptcy of Medicare, record crime and welfare dependency, a fragile economy, recurrent federal contracting scandals, expected runaway health care inflation, and mounting cynicism about politics and public service. Eight years later, the cynicism is worse, but everything else is much better. One reason: Clinton abandoned the grandiose projects he proposed in his first two years and embraced the cautious view of government Bush now trumpets. Deficits were cut. The federal bureaucracy became smaller, less imperious, and more efficient. Negotiated deals replaced ultimatums. Power flowed to states and cities, and a dynamic and decent populace did the rest.



Perhaps, given the new-economy innovations and the end of the cold war, anyone who entered the White House in 1993 would have presided over a national upswing. Nevertheless, in almost every area, Clinton's actions made for a better nation. Well-known are improvements in the economy (see "Formula Won," by Jonathan Chait, page 17) and reductions in welfare and crime. Here's a tour of some of the lower-profile things that also went right.

Health care. Clinton's 1993 proposal went down in flames, and, given its regulatory density, perhaps it should have. As a result, 44 million Americans remain uninsured—an outrage in such an affluent nation. But, by every other measure, health care has significantly improved during the Clinton presidency. Most diseases are in decline, and cancer rates have fallen for the first time in two decades. Americans are living longer and in better health. Meanwhile, the devastating medical inflation that many predicted has not come to pass. When Clinton took office, health care was more than 12 percent of GDP and was expected to hit as much as 20 percent by 2000. Had this happened, health insurance premiums would likely have doubled, and medical-cost panic would now dominate American politics. Instead, health care's share of GDP rose to just under 14 percent—a reasonable increase, given our aging population and the higher quality of life that health care now buys.

Nowhere were health care costs restrained more effectively than in Medicare. In 1993, the Congressional Budget

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DENNIS G. DALTON, Ph.D., is the Ann Whitney Olin Professor of Political Science at Barnard College, Columbia University. Professor Dalton has been honored with numerous scholarships and grants, including the Gandhi Peace Foundation Grant. Professor Dalton has written numerous articles about political theory, both classical and modern. He is a member of both the American Political Science Association and the Association for Asian Studies. Professor Dalton also is the author of *The Indian Idea of Freedom.*

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Office predicted that by 1999, the Medicare trust fund would be bankrupt. Today it is safe until at least 2025. One reason is Clinton's budget deals, which used deficit reduction partly to protect Medicare (some savings were transferred into the trust). Another is improved management of the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA)—the most important federal agency you've never heard of. Its chief, Nancy-Ann DeParle, never got much press, for the reverse-discrimination reason that she's married to a prominent journalist (Jason DeParle, of *The New York Times*). But, under her direction, HCFA eliminated a whopping $10 billion per year in questionable fees from physicians and other providers. It cracked down on "overcoding" by hospitals, many of which billed all incoming patients as if they were at death's door. Clinton's HCFA belies the cliché that government agencies are gullible and slow-witted; the agency now drives such a smart, hard bargain that Congress, in its fiscal 2001 budget, ordered it to *increase* payments to some health care providers. HCFA has also made Medicare comprehensible, replacing the legalistic brochures that seniors used to receive upon retirement with plain-English help and one of the public sector's best websites, *www.medicare.gov*. Gore's "reinventing government" initiative has been much lampooned, but at HCFA it has shown results.

Fewer bosses. The Clinton-Gore administration cut the federal payroll from 2.9 million in 1993 to 2.6 million today. More impressive, most cuts involved the expensive deadwood: According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), a majority of the eliminated jobs were "executive, administrative, and managerial." Because some federal reductions were accomplished by shifting authority to the states (exactly the reform Bush supports), employment in state and local government rose during the Clinton years. But, according to BLS data, the bulk of new state and local hires have been not executives and administrators but rather the kind of low- to mid-level staffers who actually perform services for the public. Here, as well, "reinvention" has worked.

Defense. Military spending may have been moderately underfunded under Clinton, but the U.S. Armed Forces remain the world's strongest by far. Defense spending has fallen from 5 percent of GDP at the end of the cold war to 3 percent today without any reduction in national strength, because the military has made itself more efficient internally, especially in its use of personnel, and because there have been no procurement scandals. There hasn't been a $900 hammer problem since the 1980s, or an expensive fiasco in a major program since the Navy's A-12 stealth plane, canceled by then-Defense Secretary Dick Cheney in 1991. (To be fair, the V-22 tilt-rotor aircraft may be an uncanceled fiasco in the making.) You often hear Republicans say the Clinton-Gore crowd were amateurs who lacked the management skills to run organizations. Yet HCFA and the Defense Department, two of the most monstrous bureaucracies the Potomac has to offer, have never been managed better.

The environment. With the exception of greenhouse gases, every environmental trend in the United States improved under Clinton: less smog (despite more cars); less acid rain; recovery of Boston Harbor, the Hudson River, and Puget Sound; more than 69 million acres of forest and wilderness conserved—the list goes on. And these environmental improvements (like those occurring under George Bush, which were approximately equal, on a per-year basis) have not in any way interfered with prosperity or growth, proving what so many on the right and left for so long vehemently denied: that pollution can decline while the economy expands.

George W. Bush now says he wants to negotiate with industry more and coerce it less. But that is exactly the tack Clinton followed. In most cases, Clinton administration environmental strictures were designed not by bureaucratic fiat but through relatively civil negotiations between the Environmental Protection Agency and industry. For example, new rules to reduce pollution from diesel fuels and diesel engines emerged after months of discussions that took into account industry's valid concerns (in this case, the need to retire capital stock on a realistic schedule). Similarly, EPA Administrator Carol Browner's pragmatic "results, not rules" approach has led to the cleaning up of more than half of America's Superfund sites. During the '80s, when Superfund was stalled by legalism and inaction, the media screamed bloody murder; since the program has begun cranking out success stories, the press no longer pays attention. While Gore's "end of nature" overstatements may be tiresome, his tour as national environmental manager was a triumph.

Urban renewal. In the first Bush administration, the underappreciated Jack Kemp rid the Department of Housing and Urban Development of corruption; in the first Clinton term, the mistreated Henry Cisneros saved the agency from congressional dismantling by significantly streamlining its workforce. These two reforms set the stage for Andrew Cuomo, who, in Clinton's second term, began to genuinely improve public housing. The current destruction of Chicago's grisly Robert Taylor Homes, which will be replaced by humane low-rise housing, is a HUD success. HUD's "Hope Six" project represents an important expansion of Kemp's best idea: replacing the worst public housing with modern units but letting local authorities make the key decisions. Under Clinton it has become easier to evict troublemakers from public housing, and a 1998 law that paralleled welfare reform now requires public housing recipients who don't work to perform community service. Coupled with the strong economy, reductions in crime, welfare reform, and the expanded Earned Income Tax Credit, improved housing policy has helped make places like Newark, the South Bronx, and inner-city Kansas City livable again.

Another reason cities are rebounding is a more flexible transportation policy. Clinton cut a classic compromise on transportation, resisting anti-highway bombast from environmentalists (with a rising population and traffic jams wasting more than $45 billion worth of time each year, it's incontrovertible that America needs more roads) but also resisting the road lobby's demands that money go exclusively to blacktop. Under the administration's transportation policy, states and communities choose what suits them best: roads, public transit, or bicycle trails.

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Government gizmos. If government can't do anything right, how come its gizmos work better and better? As recently as the '80s, wildly expensive Pentagon weapons systems failed test after test. Since about the time of the Gulf war, by contrast, most military technology has become almost supernaturally effective, and even ballistic missile defense, though troubled, is making halting progress. In the early '90s, errors by air traffic controllers made airliner near-misses a leading scare story; today, with air traffic continuing to surge, delays are infuriating everyone, but controller errors aren't causing crashes. The space shuttle has now flown 101 times, with no failures since 1986, even though NASA's budget has not grown in real terms. The reason you can now buy a car that tells you when to turn or a $300 pocket device that reports where you are to within three meters is that the new U.S. government Global Positioning System works, well, perfectly.

The current success of American science and technology isn't just the work of the private sector. Clinton has increased funding for the National Institutes of Health by 111 percent and for the National Science Foundation by 68 percent. The share of GDP devoted to public and commercial research and development was 2.6 percent when Clinton took office; it's 3 percent now. Gore's science-nerd side has provided fodder for many one-liners, but he has succeeded in reviving R&D as a national priority, which has contributed to better health and a higher standard of living.

Rights expansion. Quietly, the last decade has shown that rights can be expanded without harm to the economy. The Americans with Disabilities Act—signed by Bush père, implemented by Clinton—has brought disabled people into the economy without harming business. Affirmative action has been maintained with comparatively few misuses and has helped foster a black middle class whose children will not need racial preferences. The 1996 Kennedy-Kassebaum bill, which created the right to continue purchasing health insurance for people changing jobs, and the White House-backed state programs that offer health care to all low-income children whose parents do not qualify for Medicaid have also made America a fairer nation without causing predicted problems, such as unemployment. Meanwhile, the United States under Clinton has annually accepted more legal immigrants than *the rest of the world combined* and has done so without harming either the country's economy or its social fabric.

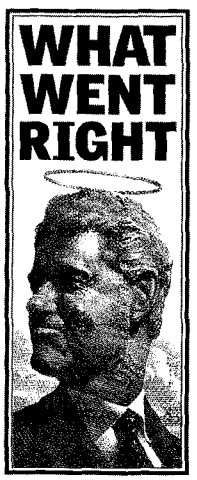
Of course, there were mistakes and failures: the lack of an energy policy, yet another unsuccessful attempt to revamp agricultural subsidies, the failure to reform Social Security, scandals at the FBI and at the Departments of Energy and Justice, White House lies large and small. But, for eight years, America has been richer, safer, and freer than at any other time in its history. Whether Clinton's decisions helped cause the favorable forces of recent years or merely floated along on them will always be impossible to know. But the Clinton administration was smarter, more careful, and more modest than almost anyone might have expected. If George W. Bush is shrewd, he'll leave much of what he finds in today's federal government well enough alone. An awful lot went right under Bill Clinton and Al Gore. Let's not forget. ■

What went right.

Air Time

By LAWRENCE F. KAPLAN

OUR FOREIGN POLICY mandarins huddled and announced it couldn't be done. A parade of retired generals took to the airwaves with the same verdict. Congressional Republicans even tried to surrender. But in Kosovo Bill Clinton confounded everyone—probably even himself. For reasons having to do less with strategy than with domestic politics, he may have even stumbled onto a new precedent for the use of American military power. Not only did he win a war, he did it without an army.



On the heels of the Kosovo victory, Clinton said it proved "that a sustained air campaign, under the right conditions, can stop an army on the ground." Such claims have been a staple of airpower devotees since the 1920s. American defense professionals, in particular, spent decades tantalizing themselves with the prospect of winning wars through bombing alone. The problem is, they'd always been wrong. Until Kosovo.

But if Kosovo showed that airpower—and, in particular, its stealth and precision components—can win wars, it also showed that "smart bombs" are only as smart as their users. This was not, after all, the first time the Clinton administration used airpower—just the first time it did so successfully. With their earlier fusillades against Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Bosnia, the Clintonites had invited Americans to indulge in the conceit that military technology obviates the need for strategic thinking. In Kosovo, they finally learned the importance of using both.

It was during the Gulf war, as cruise missiles whistled around street corners and across their TV screens, that most Americans became acquainted

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with high-tech precision warfare. But it wasn't until Kosovo that military reality caught up with that imagery. Although the bombing campaign in the Gulf war was far more deftly executed, it failed to accomplish nearly as decisive a result. One of the reasons is that, in the eight years between the two wars, the technology of American airpower—and, more important, the pace of its integration into the U.S. arsenal—improved considerably. Unlike in the Gulf war, U.S. bombers flying over the Balkans could rely on satellite guidance to peer through the clouds and strike in any weather. And if during World War II it took an average of 9,000 "dumb" bombs to destroy a major target and in Vietnam it took 176, it took about two smart bombs to do the same in Kosovo. "With all the political restraints on the air campaign," says Thomas Keaney, co-author of the Air Force's *Gulf War Air Power Survey* and head of the Johns Hopkins Foreign Policy Institute, "precision systems are what made the victory in Kosovo possible."

Those systems allowed America to inflict massive damage on Serbia with a very small number of planes, creating, as Benjamin Lambeth of RAND puts it, "the effects of massing without having to mass." And of the 23,000 bombs America dropped, half came from a mere 21 planes. Moreover, exploiting electronic countermeasures, advances in stealth technology, and a communications network vastly superior to the one fielded in the Gulf, American forces did all this with virtual impunity. Of course, it didn't hurt that U.S. planes were bombing from 15,000 feet. But, as far as their ability to destroy strategic targets with precision was concerned, it didn't matter.

To be sure, detractors claim airpower was not the deciding factor in Kosovo. Slobodan Milosevic, some argue, backed down because of the threat of a ground invasion. But exactly what that threat might have been they do not say. Certainly no such decision had been reached by the end of the war. Further, even if Clinton and the Europeans had eventually changed their minds, preparations for an invasion would have taken months, lasting at least until fall; Milosevic withdrew from Kosovo in June. Others contend it was Russian diplomacy, not airpower, that convinced the Serb dictator to accept NATO's terms. But that's not quite right. No matter who or what finally persuaded him to capitulate, Milosevic capitulated to end NATO's war against Serbia. And NATO fought that war exclusively from the air.

Other critics concede the efficacy of airpower but warn that America's ability to wreck things from a safe remove threatens to ensnarl the United States in troubling moral complications. Some have even suggested that, in Kosovo, America forfeited the traditional claim that the state possesses the authority to kill. Zbigniew Brzezinski said that, because it didn't risk American lives, the air campaign in Kosovo was an act of "technological racism." CBS's Bob Schieffer declaimed, "It sets a bad precedent to win a war without a casualty." But would the critics really have preferred a more level playing field?

In any case, the "technological racism" argument is misguided—because if new technologies safeguard American pilots, they also spare the lives of civilians below. NATO's air campaign is estimated to have claimed the lives of about 600 noncombatants. Compare that with the tens of thousands killed in any given Allied raid on a German or Japanese city during World War II. If anything, Kosovo showed that it is now possible to devastate a country's infrastructure without doing equally massive harm to its population.

BUT WHILE TECHNOLOGY was a defining element of the Kosovo victory, it wasn't the only one. In fact, the first half of the operation showed that even the most advanced technology is no surrogate for strategic coherence. Drawing on their earlier experiences in Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Bosnia, the Clintonites initially suggested that a finely calibrated round of air strikes would show Milosevic the error of his ways. Hence, offering action in lieu of purpose, they plinked a few anti-aircraft sites. While the United States had launched as many as 1,000 combat sorties per day during the opening week of Operation Desert Storm, during the first week of the air operation over Kosovo it averaged only 50 per day.

After a few weeks of pinprick attacks, the Clintonites belatedly recognized that tactical scoring, particularly inside Kosovo itself, wouldn't suffice. "We told them over and over," says a senior military officer involved in the war's planning, "if you want to win this thing, take the war home to Belgrade." And so, midway though Operation Allied Force, the United States launched a genuine strategic-bombing campaign. The aim was to destroy what Air Force General Michael Short identified as Serbia's "center of gravity"—that is, Belgrade's economic, industrial, and political infrastructure. By late May, NATO had more than doubled the number of strike aircraft flying against Serbia. More important, it approved a dramatic expansion of the target list. Bridges, cigarette factories, auto plants, electricity grids—all were hit in the space of a few weeks, as part of an effort that destroyed 100 percent of Yugoslavia's petroleum-refining facilities, inflicted an estimated $100 billion in damage, halved the country's economic output, and put 100,000 Serbs out of work. By the end of the month, the ensuing hardship had sparked protests and popular unrest throughout Serbia. "I can see a small village surviving months or years in these conditions, but in such a big city—I simply cannot imagine it," said the deputy mayor of Belgrade. "This is not Phnom Penh."

Belgrade differed from Phnom Penh in more ways than one. Where America's war in Southeast Asia lasted for ten years (and ended in defeat), the war in Kosovo lasted just 78 days. Hence a final benefit of this new style of war: It comes tailor-made for our flabby age. According to the reigning conventional wisdom, Americans have zero tolerance for battlefield losses. But, at the same time, a turbulent international scene requires the United States to use force more frequently than ever before. Advances in strategic airpower may offer an occasional way out of this bind—a low-cost and effective means to safeguard the interests of a nation of couch potatoes. True, airpower alone could never subdue a vast and powerful country like China. Nor, for that matter, would it have much effect in a place like Somalia, where there's nothing much to break. Still, we now know that, under the right conditions, it can win wars by itself. And Bill Clinton, of all people, showed us how. ■

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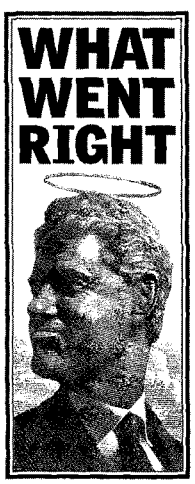
What went right.

Formula Won

By JONATHAN CHAIT

ALMOST EXACTLY EIGHT years ago, then-President-elect Clinton held an economic summit in Little Rock, Arkansas. It was an unabashedly wonky, academic affair, at a time when such attributes were considered virtuous in a president. The conference was noted for its length (19 hours) and for its openness, which permitted Clinton to show off his economic expertise before the C-SPAN cameras and the national media. In retrospect, though, the meeting's lasting import was its ideological disunity. Its attendees, several of whom had not voted for their host, included corporate chieftains, unionists, economists, and small-business owners. The free-flowing discussion helped persuade the new president to scale back his plans for a fiscal stimulus package—the traditional Democratic response to economic sluggishness—and instead put greater emphasis on reducing the deficit. (George W. Bush's recent economic conference, by contrast, was limited to three dozen business leaders—of whom nearly two-thirds had contributed to his campaign—and was closed to the media, all to ensure it produced unanimous support for the president-elect's tax cut.)



The intellectual heterodoxy of Little Rock blossomed into a full-blown economic philosophy that helped bring about a run of material uplift virtually unlike any the country has ever seen. The qualities most on display at Clinton's economic summit—complexity and intellectual openness—enabled him to alter the established models of liberal thought to fit changing circumstances. But the same qualities that made Clintonomics a success have kept it from being fully appreciated. Because it synthesizes elements of both liberal and conservative economic thought, it has not registered with the public as a distinct governing ideology. For the same reason, it finds itself without an organized constituency to fight on its behalf. Where classic New Deal liberalism has labor unions and assorted liberal interest groups, and anti-tax conservatism has the rich, Clinton's economic policies have no natural ideological support. Which is why they may not endure.

If Clintonism did not fit easily into familiar political categories, it was well-matched to the conditions of America in 1993. When the new administration came into office, the federal budget was hemorrhaging red ink and the economy was recovering fitfully, threatening a replay of the recession that had propelled Clinton into office. Left-liberal economic thinking—rooted in the Keynesian argument that in an economic slowdown the government should boost demand with tax cuts or spending increases—offered no good answer. Boosting the economy would aggravate the deficit, and fixing the deficit would hurt the economy.

The president-elect's first instinct was to thread the needle by introducing a short-term package of new spending to boost the economy, while cutting the deficit in the long run. But, according to Bob Woodward's *The Agenda*, Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan convinced the president he had another choice. Holders of government bonds, he explained, were demanding unusually high interest rates because they believed the government would be running deficits well into the future, resulting in inflation, which would eat into the value of their bonds. If Clinton could convince bondholders that he intended to reduce the deficit, long-term interest rates on those bonds would drop. Reduced interest rates would make it cheaper for businesses and individuals to borrow money, which would spur the economy. Greenspan also made it clear, Woodward's book suggests, that if the president would ratchet down the deficit, Greenspan could keep short-term interest rates, which the Fed controls, low. The upshot of these deals was that Clinton could cut the deficit without tipping the economy back into recession.

By the skin of his teeth, Clinton pushed through Congress a tax increase and new caps on domestic spending, projected to trim $496 billion from the deficit over five years. The reaction was exactly as Greenspan had predicted: Interest rates fell. Since we cannot run experiments with history, it is impossible to prove with absolute certainty that one economic event caused another—maybe interest rates fell because of the soybean market in Bulgaria or because the Yankees fired their manager. But contemporaneous news accounts made it clear that most reasonable observers discerned a direct connection between the bond market and Clinton's budget. "The spectacular bond market rally accelerated yesterday," reads a *Wall Street Journal* account from February 1993, "with long-term Treasury bond yields plunging to another record low as investors rushed to embrace President Clinton's economic package."

Those in the left wing of the Democratic Party remember 1993 as the year Bill Clinton sold out to curry favor with Greenspan and the bond market. "A fixation on placating Wall Street," wrote Robert Reich, a liberal who resigned from Clinton's Cabinet, "has made it difficult to fulfill the original mandate for a new economics centered on helping all Americans adapt to economic change." But Clinton's 1993 program actually had a distinctly progressive hue. It is true that, in

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embracing deficit reduction, Clinton accepted a model of economic growth that resembled Greenspan's. But the *way* Clinton pursued deficit reduction was not conservative at all. It included a sizable increase in the top tax bracket, affecting the top 1.2 percent of taxpayers. The Clinton budget also made room to expand certain social programs, most notably ratcheting up the Earned Income Tax Credit, a subsidy for the working poor.

It is a common mistake to think that Clintonomics represented watered-down Republicanism. Clinton did move to the right. But the defining feature of his economic policy was diametric opposition to GOP ideas. Republicans wanted to redistribute wealth upward; Clinton wanted to redistribute it downward. Republicans wanted to consume the budget surplus; Clinton wanted to save it. Clinton's ideology combined support for redistribution with a belief in fiscal conservatism.

One reason this ideological synthesis has gone largely unappreciated is that the Clintonites never devised a well-known name for it. (I took a stab in a 1999 *American Prospect* article, dubbing it "progressive fiscal conservatism," a phrase that has not exactly caught fire.) But another reason is that it's a philosophy that Clinton himself failed to uphold faithfully. After Republicans took over Congress in 1994, a shaken Clinton brought in the reptilian Dick Morris, whose beliefs—to the extent he had any—ran toward traditional conservatism. Over the next two and a half years, Clinton grew increasingly willing to compromise with Republicans, and it became virtually impossible to discern in him any distinct principles. This period culminated in the 1997 Balanced Budget Act, a deal between Clinton and the congressional GOP that was neither especially progressive (it was loaded, at the GOP's behest, with tax cuts that accrued mainly to the well-to-do) nor fiscally conservative (its primary "budget cuts" were, by design, unworkable and were never carried out).

BUT BY THE end of 1997 Clinton's "lost" period had ended, and he returned to the principles of his first two years. The precipitating cause of this shift was the appearance of budget surpluses, which occurred as the prosperous economy filled the Treasury's coffers with tax revenues. Unsurprisingly, as soon as the deficit disappeared, the appetite for restraint did as well. In late 1997, Congress was brimming with plans to divvy up the new bounty. Had Clinton continued to follow his pure political instincts, he could have spent his last three years in office trading goodies with Republicans—tax cuts for them, spending increases for him, everybody goes home happy.

Instead, Clinton came up with a masterstroke, insisting in his 1998 State of the Union address that Congress not delve into the surplus until it had saved Social Security. Republicans, taken by surprise by this popular-sounding idea, leaped to their feet in applause. But they were acquiescing in the instrument of their own demise. By agreeing with Clinton, the GOP effectively prohibited itself from using the surplus for a big tax cut. As a direct result of this maneuver, $600 billion of the national debt has now been paid off.

Clinton's embrace of debt reduction infuriated his party's left. It was one thing to accede to the Republican demand to balance the budget, they argued, but quite another to go further and promise to eliminate the national debt. Here was a golden opportunity for Democrats to fulfill a generation's worth of spending priorities, and it was being subverted by their own president. But Clinton had sophisticated reasons for focusing on debt reduction. First of all, basic prudence: Forecasters predicted that the surpluses would last for only a decade or so. Meanwhile, the federal budget faced huge long-term liabilities in unfunded public pension benefits that would accrue when the baby-boom generation retired. Devoting a temporary funding source (the surplus) to permanent drains on the budget (new programs or tax cuts) would make the long-term situation bleaker still. And even if Clinton had wanted to use some of the surplus to expand his pet programs, he would have paid a huge price. Given the continued GOP control of Congress, new spending would have meant agreeing to a large tax cut tilted toward the wealthy—which would have both imperiled the government's fiscal health and exacerbated inequality.

FURTHERMORE, BY 1998 the Clintonites had increasingly come to believe that reducing the national debt was critical to maintaining prosperity. Here they embraced a consensus in the economic profession that ran from center right to center left. The logic is simple: For the government to hold debt, it must convince private citizens to lend it money. But when a citizen lends a dollar to the federal government, that is one fewer dollar available to be lent to somebody in the private sector. If you're in the private sector looking to borrow money—to start a business, say, or buy new equipment—then high government debt means less money available for you to borrow. Thus, if you want a loan, you have to pay more (in higher interest rates) to get it. When the government reduces its debt, the opposite happens: The demand for capital drops, making it easier for businesses to borrow. With more plants and equipment, businesses can operate more effectively, and, as a result, the economy expands in the long run.

This is, of course, precisely what has happened. Over the past eight years, the federal budget has gone from a quarter-trillion-dollar deficit to a quarter-trillion-dollar surplus. Investment in equipment and software has grown at more than twice the rate it did in the 1980s. Clinton has repeated the litany of economic indicators so often—lowest unemployment in a generation, longest economic expansion ever—that they have lost their power to impress. But even Clinton haters don't deny that the nation has enjoyed a fantastic boom.

What they do deny is that the president deserves any credit for it. On the left, Clinton's efforts have run into an instinctive suspicion of economic growth. For many liberals, rapid economic growth evokes the image of a gilded age, the benefits of which flow to a privileged elite blinded to the plight of the poor. There is a good reason for this prejudice. Beginning in the 1970s, real wages for the average worker began to decline, and inequality grew rapidly. The boom of the 1980s did not improve living conditions for the poor, who saw their incomes decline even further.

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And so, faced with a second boom, many liberals concluded that the pattern was repeating itself, with dot-com millionaires replacing the junk-bond barons of the Reagan era. Articles about increasing inequality appeared regularly in the media during the Clinton years. "Mr. Gore steers clear of the income gap, which only widened on his and President Clinton's watch," reported *The New York Times* last September. "[T]he bottom four-fifths of households—numbering 217 million—took a thinner slice of the nation's economic pie last year, 50 percent, than in 1977, when it was 56 percent." Ralph Nader's presidential campaign, which was fashioned in large part as a protest against Clintonomics, also grasped onto the theme. "It used to be said that a rising tide lifts all boats," he declared. "Today, it's 'A rising tide lifts all yachts.'"

But this lament is completely false. One clue lies in the statistics cited in the "rising inequality" stories. The *Times*, for instance, considered the change from 1977 to the present day. It's true—salaries are less equal now than they were 23 years ago. But they're *not* less equal than they were in 1993. Since then, the poorest one-fifth of all workers have seen their after-tax wages grow *faster* than the richest fifth have.

Part of this is directly attributable to Clinton's policies, which raised taxes for the rich and cut them for the poor. Another part is simply the result of a well-known phenomenon: Low unemployment bids up the price of labor. For the first time in 25 years, the labor market has been tight enough for a long enough time to give a sustained boost to the wages of workers at the bottom. It's true that, in the last eight years, the poor have not made up the ground they lost in the previous 20. But that's an argument for continuing Clinton's policies, not abandoning them.

THE RIGHT-WING CRITICISM of Clintonomics is more slippery. During the administration's first few years, conservatives insisted the Clinton boom could not match the glories of the Reagan era. Eventually, that line became untenable, and the right began arguing that Reagan's policies had actually been in effect all along. "Bill Clinton is reaping a harvest that Ronald Reagan sowed," wrote Reagan hagiographer Dinesh D'Souza, summing up the party line of the late '90s. "Clinton has had no economic policy. He hasn't needed one."

The trouble with this theory is that conservatives had already absolved Reagan of any responsibility for events that occurred after 1990—when George Bush raised taxes and the Reagan partisans announced that the supply-side experiment was over. "The economy of the 1990s is likely to belong to someone else," sniffed a *Wall Street Journal* editorial. "Good luck." Three years later, when Clinton proposed his upper-bracket tax increase, conservatives unanimously predicted economic disaster. Consider, for instance, the shifting arguments of Lawrence Kudlow, a supply-side polemicist and economic adviser to leading Republicans. In 1993, he opined in the *Journal*, "There's no question that President Clinton's across-the-board tax increases on labor, capital, and energy will throw a wet blanket over the recovery and depress the economy's long-term potential to grow." More recently, Kudlow abandoned this line, arguing instead that Clinton's success was due to his Reaganomic inclinations. Clinton's policies, he wrote last spring, "sound an awful lot like supply-side economic policies." But when the economy tailed off in December, Kudlow reversed himself again. "The Clinton policies of rising tax burdens, high interest rates, and re-regulation," he wrote this month, "are responsible for the sinking stock market and the slumping economy."

More sophisticated arguments against Clintonomics—those not indigenous to the partisan left or right—grant the president some credit for the economy, but usually not very much. The bulk of the credit usually goes to the private sector, with its information-technology revolution, and to the genius of Alan Greenspan. "[M]uch of what happened to the economy in the 1990s had little to do with Washington and was part of a process that began before Mr. Clinton and Mr. Gore took office," concluded a typical story in the *Times* last October. "At the same time that the administration was setting out to address the fiscal mess, the Federal Reserve Board's decision to hold interest rates at rock-bottom levels throughout 1992 and 1993 was giving the economy a kick."

Undeniably, Greenspan played a leading part in sustaining the boom, by allowing unemployment to fall to unprecedented depths without jacking up interest rates. But the reason he could pursue a loose monetary policy is that Clinton was following a tight fiscal one. The two worked in concert. To consider Greenspan's contribution in the absence of Clinton makes no more sense than considering Clinton's contribution in the absence of Greenspan.

ANOTHER OBJECTION IS that interest rates, rather than falling continuously during the Clinton years, bounced around. That may be true, but it misses the point. During an economic expansion, more people want to invest, so the demand for capital will rise. That tends to put pressure on interest rates to rise—as more people get into the market for money, the cost goes up. But, during the Clinton years, prosperity created smaller and smaller deficits and then bigger and bigger surpluses, and, by not spending them, Clinton allowed the stock of capital to grow to meet the demand.

Clinton skeptics will note that the changes in fiscal policy were unexpected and dwarfed the White House's own projections. Clinton tried only to cut the deficit in half, and it ended up in surplus. How could he have been responsible? But, on Clinton's behalf, one could argue that his initial foray into fiscal conservatism set in motion a virtuous cycle: less debt, which begat more capital for investment, which begat more productivity, which begat more growth, which begat less debt. Clinton's program certainly deserves *some* responsibility for the boom; you can make a reasonable case that it deserves the lion's share.

Clinton's true contribution to the 1990s boom will be better understood with greater hindsight. Even then, there will always be questions and debates. But the absence of absolute certainty should not prevent us from working with the evidence we have. And the preponderance of that evidence suggests that the outgoing administration got it about right. This may not be fully appreciated until the new president has succeeded in overturning the policies of the last. After all, you never know what you have until it's gone. ■

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What went right: a dissent.

Method Acting

By JOHN B. JUDIS

WHEN PEOPLE SAY Bill Clinton will go down as a great president because of his record on the economy, they mean two different things. First, they mean that Clinton's economic policies have contributed to an unusually prosperous eight years. By and large, that's true. Second, they mean that his economic team—including Robert Rubin, Lawrence Summers, and Alan Greenspan—developed an enduring formula for successful economic management. By and large, that's nonsense. In fiscal policy, international economic policy, and monetary policy, the principles with which the Clinton administration has become identified can't solve the challenges faced by the next administration. In fact, they didn't even solve the challenges faced by this one.

In fiscal policy, the story goes, Clinton took office wanting to stimulate the economy with new spending. But, under Rubin's and Greenspan's tutelage, he hit upon a fundamental law of modern economics: If you take on the deficit, the private sector will stimulate the economy for you. Clinton's austere 1993 budget, according to this narrative, stimulated private investment by reducing public investment. It also reassured bond traders worried that the deficit would spark inflation. Reassured, they reduced interest payments on 30-year bonds, which reduced mortgages and other consumer and business loans, thus revving up the economy. Every time anyone proposes large tax cuts or substantial new spending rather than further reduction of the debt, New Democrats remind them of these historic achievements.

But they're misreading history. Once Al Gore cast the tie-breaking vote on August 6, 1993, for Clinton's deficit-reduction package, the boom did not begin. For most of Clinton's first term, the economy stayed weak. Unemployment was still 6 percent in April 1995. In 1994 and 1995, real wages fell. Private investment in technology and software—the heart of what would become the new-economy boom—stagnated from the fourth quarter of 1994 through the third quarter of 1995. In the second quarter of 1995, GDP limped along at a near-recession rate of 0.8 percent.

The reason is that between February 1994 and February 1995, Greenspan raised the federal funds rate (which banks pay for overnight loans) seven times: from 3 percent to 6 percent. Acting on Milton Friedman's theory that there is a "non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment" (NAIRU)—a rate of unemployment below which inflation escalates—Greenspan acted to keep unemployment from dipping much below 6 percent. With interest rates high, a tight fiscal policy didn't stimulate private investment but further discouraged it, and the economy stayed sluggish.

In Clinton's second term, of course, the economy soared. But it wasn't because tight fiscal policy inevitably led to an investment boom—it was because technological innovations convinced Greenspan that he could lower interest rates without sparking inflation. By the mid-'90s, the growth of the computer and telecommunications industries was leading to unmistakable gains in productivity. Between 1995 and 1999, according to calculations by *Business Week*, high-tech investments contributed to one-quarter of the growth in GDP. Stock prices also rose, which convinced stockholders to spend more on goods and services.

In July 1995, worried about the downturn, Greenspan began lowering interest rates. Over the next four years, convinced that increased productivity was driving the NAIRU down, he would raise them only once, even as unemployment sank to 4 percent.

So, yes, with interest rates low, businesses and consumers hungry for computers and cell phones, and the stock market fueling consumption, tight fiscal policy stimulated the economy by freeing up funds for private investment. But that doesn't mean that reducing the debt is always better than increasing spending or cutting taxes. Should the market for computers and telecommunications grow saturated—and it may be already—and should the price of stocks plummet, then an expansionary fiscal policy might be exactly what we need. But, largely as a result of the Clinton-Rubin-Greenspan hagiography that has arisen in recent years, most Democrats no longer agree.

THERE'S ALSO A myth about the Clinton administration's international economic policy: that East Asia's internal economic problems almost blew up the world, and the Clintonites saved it. And, indeed, the Clintonites did an admirable job of responding to the global financial crisis. The problem is that they also helped cause it.

In March 1995, Japan, the world's second-largest economy, was mired in recession. In the past, it had relied on manufactured exports to sustain its growth. But Japan's exports were threatened by the rise in the yen's value against the dollar, which was pricing Japanese goods out of markets in the United States and in Asian countries whose currencies were pegged to the dollar. That spring, Japanese Ministry of Finance official Eisuke Sakakibara met with Summers and later with Rubin to plead for help devaluing the Japanese yen. Sakakibara warned not just of a downturn but of a potential bank collapse. Rubin and Summers, the Mexican peso crisis

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fresh in their minds, bought Sakakibara's argument—and agreed to join the Bank of Japan in propping up the dollar against the yen. Between April 1995 and April 1997, the yen fell an astonishing 60 percent against the dollar.

The new agreement, by lowering the yen's value against the dollar, drove up Japan's trade surplus with the United States. But the agreement had even graver repercussions in the Asian countries whose currencies were pegged to the dollar. By the mid-'90s, countries like Thailand, Indonesia, and South Korea had become awash in foreign loans from Japan, the United States, and Western Europe. To pay the interest, they needed to keep increasing exports. But the yen agreement made that impossible. The agreement gave Japan a price advantage over its East Asian competitors in the United States and other markets, and it made East Asian products more expensive in Japan as well. In 1996, Thailand's exports actually shrank. Of course, other factors—corrupt officials, unscrupulous currency traders, shortsighted International Monetary Fund policymakers—also contributed to the Asian financial crisis that began in fall 1997. But the crisis was sparked by the Clinton administration's misguided efforts to bolster Japan.

Rubin and Summers probably believe they had no choice—that, as Sakakibara warned, Japan itself could have sparked a global financial crisis had the yen remained high. But most observers believe that while Japan faced continued recession, it was never really in danger of collapse. Said one American official who was then in Tokyo, "The Ministry of Finance really did sell us a bill of goods, and we bought it."

The underlying cause of Japan's economic woes has never been the strong yen but the country's reliance on foreign, rather than domestic, consumption. The yen agreement became the Clinton administration's substitute for the harder task of insisting upon reform within Japan—and, as a result, five years later Japan remains mired in recession, its foundering economy still threatening East Asia by denying those countries a vital market for their goods. The United States today needs to pressure Japan more than ever—yet, in part because the Rubin-Summers international economic policy is considered so successful, such pressure has a place on almost no one's agenda.

THANKS TO BOB WOODWARD, nowhere has the hagiography been as pervasive as on monetary policy. To be sure, Greenspan does deserve credit. He recognized before his colleagues on the Federal Reserve that advances in productivity were reducing the threat of inflation. He also recognized the danger posed by the stock market "bubble." But, by lowering interest rates in fall 1998, he actually inflated that bubble further—and ignored a better way.

The bubble began in 1996, when the ratio of stock prices to corporate earnings went out of kilter. By the late '90s, the ratio had reached about 30 to one—double the historic average. Some dot-com stocks enjoyed enormous valuations merely on the basis of anticipated earnings. And "irrational exuberance" about the stock market was fueling irrationally high consumer spending. The conditions were ripe for a recession: When stock prices finally fell in line with earnings, they would drag consumer demand down with them.

Greenspan had a tool at his disposal that might have dampened the stock market without dramatically slowing the economy. Under the Securities and Exchange Act of 1934, the Federal Reserve regulates the percentage of a stock's price a purchaser must put up in order to buy it. He can get a loan for the rest. The tool, Regulation T, was designed to dampen speculation. Since 1974, the margin requirement has been 50 percent; Greenspan could have raised it to 60 percent—a move advocated by Henry Reuss, former chairman of the House Banking Committee, and by influential Wall Street economist Henry Kaufman.

But Greenspan refused to use Regulation T. Worse still, he further inflated the bubble. In August 1998, with the stock market fallen sharply in response to the news that Russia was going to default on its loans, Greenspan initiated the first of three reductions in the federal funds rate. As UCLA historian Robert Brenner explains in his forthcoming book, *The Boom and the Bubble*, the Fed appeared to create a floor underneath the stock market to protect investors. Reassured, investors pushed the Dow Jones Industrial Average from lower than 8,000 in September 1998 to higher than 11,000 in December 1999.

According to Woodward's book *Maestro*, Greenspan lowered interest rates to prevent the international economy from experiencing a new crisis. Perhaps that was necessary. But if Greenspan had accompanied the rate cuts with an increase in the margin requirement, he could have simultaneously ensured the vitality of the American market for foreign goods while discouraging new flights of speculation.

INSTEAD OF TRYING to stop the inflation in stock prices, in June 1999 Greenspan took aim at what he claimed were growing signs of price inflation brought about by the drop in unemployment below 4 percent. Greenspan, it turned out, still adhered to NAIRU doctrine, albeit at a lower level. His rate increases over the next year, combined with the administration's contractive fiscal policy, did finally bring down stock prices. But they also stopped economic growth in its tracks.

The signs of a slowdown have been clearest in the high-tech sector that helped power the boom. According to *Business Week*, growth in new orders of information technology fell precipitously to 1.2 percent in the third quarter of last year from 34 percent the quarter before. Business purchases of communications equipment fell 2 percent. These falloffs, along with the rapid decline in stock prices and the government's conservative fiscal policy, could prompt a recession. And, if other countries that have depended upon American markets for exports also experience a downturn, that recession could be deep and long-lasting.

How should the federal government respond to such a possibility? Perhaps with tax cuts and new spending to stimulate the economy—even if that means not reducing the debt—and by pressuring countries like Japan to reform their economies so they import more. In short, by ignoring the "lessons" of the Clinton administration's success. Policymakers need to act soon, and all those gushing Clinton retrospectives aren't helping. ■

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Stanley Kauffmann on Films

Three in One

STEVEN SODERBERGH PROSpers, and his prospering is a chapter in recent cultural history. He made his debut in 1989 with *sex, lies and videotape*, a small-scale film unique in its intelligent candor and self-confident rhythm. Two years later he presented the disappointing *Kafka*, not a bankrupt work but one in which Soderbergh was struggling to keep up payments on his residence in art. The same was true of his next picture, *King of the Hill*. His next four pictures, again not completely barren, were attempts to maintain membership in the slightly lower YDOP Club. (Young Directors of Promise.) Then he saw the light—one kind of empowering light. In 1998 he made *Out of Sight*, an action comedy-romance, flying with exuberant skill and with zero ambition toward gravity. What confirmed Soderbergh's right in his new mode was that it seemed a new true home for him, no slumming: *Out of Sight* was enjoyable. After *The Limey*, a reticent thriller with a strained twist, came *Erin Brockovich*, which gave Julia Roberts her best role so far and was even more pleasing than *Out of Sight*. And now comes **Traffic** (USA), a slick large-scale power vehicle that zooms toward large-scale success.

His career is interesting because it is not a banal account of engulfing commerce, a cause to mourn the passing of the 1989 Soderbergh. First of all, *sex, lies and videotape* was so individual a work that it would have been wasteful to try to repeat it. Many a new artist with a new vision—in any art—mortgages his future to a successful debut, attempting to repeat its style. Soderbergh floundered in his first attempts to move on, but at least he didn't try to repeat his original success. It now seems clear that the real importance of that initial success was in its empowerment. The first film brought him the chance to develop technically and to find the growth in imaginative resource that technique can bestow. It enabled him to deal with serious subjects in widely acceptable form. *Erin Brockovich* was an obviously simplified treatment of ecological troubles, but it plastered that subject on a lot of brows. *Traffic* will do at least as much with some truth about American drug problems. I have reservations about it, but the film certainly goes where it wants to go, skillfully and strongly.

Fundamentally, what Soderbergh has done with his career so far is not to beat the commercial film world at its own game—an ambition that is a death trap—but to find a way to employ the best of himself in the most expensive art on earth. It is an embrace that, when it works, makes both parties smile. There are plentiful precedents: René Clair and Billy Wilder, for example, both began outside the mainstream and then moved to the center, abroad and in the United States, without losing the core of themselves.

Traffic derives from a British TV series about drugs, selling and buying. The screenplay by Stephen Gaghan, whose dialogue is fresh and lively, tells three stories set in the United States and Mexico. They are thematically linked but not conventionally interwoven. Number One takes place chiefly in and around Tijuana, and follows the efforts of two Mexican detectives to break a local drug cartel. Number Two is about a federal judge in Cincinnati who is appointed by the White House as drug czar—absolute leader of the government war on drugs—and who soon finds out that his teenage daughter is a druggie. Number Three is about a wealthy young wife in San Diego, mother of one child with another on the way, who discovers only when her husband is arrested that his money comes from drugs.

The reservations. Story Number One is burdened with a weary cliché character. The head of the Mexican police is a smooth, philosophical torturer, like so many that we have met in crime and war films. Number Two has a touch of patness. It is just barely possible that, after federal investigation, the government would appoint a drug czar with a daughter who is a druggie; but after we have accepted the possibility, it leads to the film's most blatant "movie" sequence: the father—a federal judge who now has a prominent presidential appointment—goes searching for his daughter in drug dens, breaking down doors, and so on. Number Three is a mite confusing. Is it possible that the young wife, shown as cool and smart, had no scrap of previous knowledge—no curiosity—about her husband's business? Is it possible that after she finds out, she could immediately take on the role of gang chief, dealing with dealers, ordering a killing?

A few other bothers must be noted. Twice Soderbergh uses the easy irony of two people who matter to each other passing each other accidentally in the street. For only the laziest of imposed reasons, the judge has a farewell moment with a departing black law clerk. An early encounter of the two U.S. detectives with a prime suspect is distended with bad jokes and is unclear in its physical action. In each of the pairs of detectives, one pair Mexican and one American, one man is killed, and in each case it is the less interesting man. (In the theater that role used to be known as "Charles, his friend.")

In fact, any one of the film's three stories taken alone would leak or lean a bit. Soderbergh's astuteness is in combining them. Thus, in some degree, they reinforce one another, and the sheer size of the trilogy—two and a half hours—propels us out of the specifics of each story to a sense of panorama. Add that the panorama conveys the size and the near invulnerability of the drug problem as it stands now. The film does not dabble in reassurance. Add that the film confronts the horrifying fact that one chief target of drug dealers is the American child. Add, too, that victory in the drug war is shown to rest elsewhere than with the police and the destruction of cartels. (Drug busts always remind me of federal agents' raids on bars and booze warehouses during Prohibition. Bootlegging wasn't stopped by those raids; the solution was otherwise.) Victory rests not with the $20 billion (plus state expenditures) war on drugs, but with elimination of the market. We get a final glimpse of one family's effort to help in this root solution.

But I cannot merely "add" that *Traffic* is well made: its excellent making is part of its being. Soderbergh and his editor, Stephen Mirrione, are merciless. Early in the film, legends on the screen clarify changes of place. But that's only in the beginning: subsequently the film zips from one story strand to another, usually with a clean cut, sometimes with a quick fade. Soon we learn from the film's visual process that we are to grasp Soderbergh's implication: these three stories are only superficially separable. Though separate, they are all elements in the same situation.

The cinematography is by Soderbergh himself, using (for whatever reason) a

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pseudonym. A great deal of the shooting is done with a hand-held camera, thus adding a sense of the impromptu yet, in this case, without losing much pictorial value. Throughout, Soderbergh spreads contrasting tones in some sequences, sometimes sepia, sometimes almost icy blue, much of the time sharply realistic. No pattern is apparent in these shifts, though most of the outdoor Mexican scenes are drenched in blistering sun.

For the cast, only praise. Benicio Del Toro, as a Mexican detective, has the film actor's state of grace: he charms while he acts, not by trying to charm. Tomas Milian tries to make the suave torturer unusual and almost succeeds. Michael Douglas, as the judge made czar, paints in pastels, not vibrant colors, but he has a committed intelligence. Don Cheadle, as a DEA agent, knows how to keep secrets and let us enjoy his secrecy. Catherine Zeta-Jones, the wealthy young wife, can't make her role credible—no one could—but it is agreeable to watch her try. As the teenage druggie, Erika Christensen understands, plumbs, presents a crucial and fine performance. In a Washington party sequence, several senators play themselves, roles that they are accustomed to playing.

Luck to Steven Soderbergh. He hasn't changed horses in midstream: he has changed streams and kept the same horse and is trying to head him the same way. ■

Jed Perl on Art

The Adolescent City

I.

CITIES HAVE FOR centuries been the hothouses where art and literature flourish. Yet the artists and writers who learn their craft and find their way and do their very greatest work in London or Paris or Rome are obviously under no obligation to give us concrete information about the metropolis that shapes them. True, there was a time in the nineteenth century when Balzac and Dickens, through their vast fictional explorations of urban life, could make it seem as if the city that had formed the artist was also his ultimate subject; but the city can just as often register obliquely, in a quality of light that we associate with Titian's Venice or a rhythm of conversation that we associate with Shakespeare's London. Some will say that people who see a reflection of an artist's city in an artist's work are fabricating causal relationships, and certainly nobody can prove that the linear and spatial clarity of Florentine Renaissance painting was a product of the city's rationalist, mercantile spirit. And yet few would actually deny the connection, although some might well be inclined to wonder if Leonardo's softly modeled shadows are not equally Florentine.

New York, like London and Paris and so many other European cities before it, provides both a stomping ground and a range of subjects for artists and writers. Here, too, the relationship between the artist and the city is a freewheeling give-and-take: in part a question of what New York offers, in part a question of what an artist chooses to accept and to reject. If you ask artists and writers why they live in New York, and whether the city influences their work, you are as likely as not to be met with a shrug, a laugh, a look of incredulity. They can offer all the usual reasons for loving the city and hating the city. Artists and writers find in Manhattan what lawyers and merchants find: this is where the action is. And if you press them for a deeper explanation, they will probably reply that if you can't find the answer in their work, you will not find it anywhere. Which leaves you more or less where you started.

The organic relationship between a person and a place is never an easy thing to define. The closer you look, the more circular the process may seem to become. For most writers and artists, the city is less an object to be contemplated than a medium that they inhabit. The deepest effects that a city has may be structural and abstract, buried in the rhythms of a prose style or a painterly technique, and how we describe such substructures is hard to say. What an artist thinks about a city can be as elusive as what an artist thinks about himself or herself. One of the vexing questions about the relationship between great art and great cities is a nature versus nurture question. Is it the force of an artist's vision that makes us see the city a certain way? Or does the place shape the creator's imagination, and teach the artist to see? And once you have looked at the country from the city, is your view a city view or a country view? Could Cézanne have become the master of Aix if he were not in some sense a Parisian artist? And didn't Tennessee Williams have to have been a bit of a New Yorker to create the New Orleans of *A Streetcar Named Desire*?

Style may be less a response to what is close at hand than a form of escape, an oppositional device or an idealistic gesture. Consider the work of the late-nineteenth-century painter Albert Pinkham Ryder. He worked in New York most of his life, and his dark atmospheres and boats on stormy seas and moonlit forests seem to exude the city's spirit, although in ways that would be hard precisely to explain. In 1924, in *Port of New York*, one of the great books about the city's coming of age as a capital of art and literature, Paul Rosenfeld began with Ryder, whose work he presented as a sort of nocturnal doppelgänger haunting the merchant city of the day. Ryder's New York, he wrote, may be detected in "the evening and the night, with their stillness, their vagueness of outline, their lack of dimensions; the moonlight, with its unreal day, delicate parody of the world of the sun and the reason, were like the place which his mind rejected but his bosom felt."

Writing seven years later in *The Brown Decades*, his study of urban culture after the Civil War, Lewis Mumford presented Ryder as a case of the dialectical nature of the artistic imagination. Mumford was amazed that Ryder's art "should have grown up and survived in the midst of the massive materialism which characterized the Brown Decades." And yet one can still not "altogether deny the brutal dominant force some of its share in the phenomenon: its existence perhaps provided the need for compensatory expressions on another plane, and the intensity of one has some relation to the crass exuberance of the other." Ryder is everything that New York is not, and that makes him all the more a symbol of the city, of America's greatest commercial center.

II.

CITIES ARE FULL of immediately dramatic juxtapositions, but they also suggest broader contrasts: between life in the city and life in the suburbs, or in the countryside, or in the country as a whole. For novelists, certainly,

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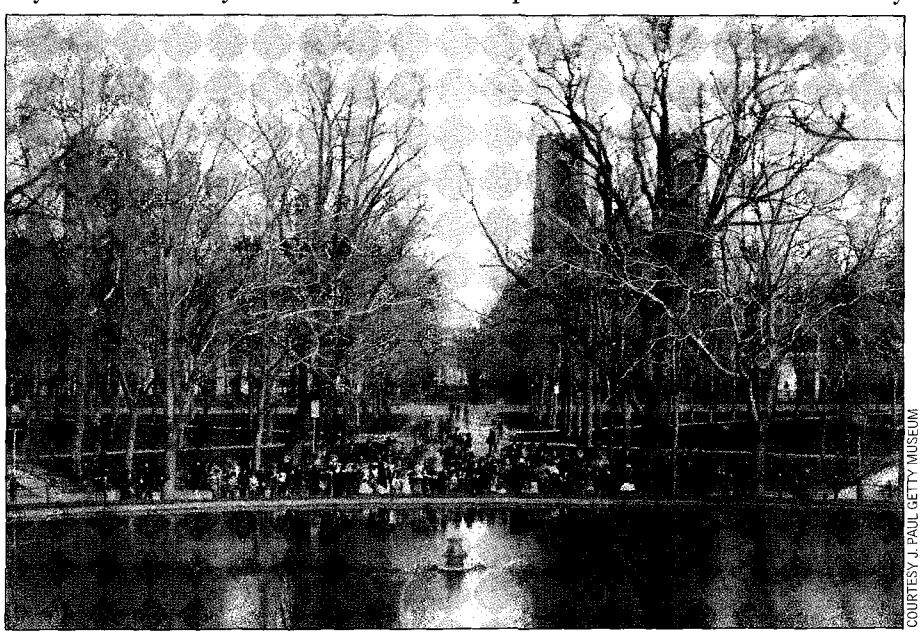
there are few more powerful ways of describing the city than through the eyes of a person who has just arrived. The pages in Balzac's *Lost Illusions* in which the young writer Lucien Chardon comes to Paris and wanders through the overwhelming elegance of the city constitute one of the greatest descriptions in all of literature of the tidal pull of urban life, with its intoxicating strangeness. Visual artists have generally shied away from such a theme, which necessitates unfolding, multiplying revelations, though there are a few exceptions, the greatest of which is probably Ambrogio Lorenzetti's vast *City of Good Government*, painted on a wall in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena in 1338–1339. Here relations between the city and the country center around the gate of Siena, where elegant aristocrats going out for a day of hunting pass country yokels coming into town with their livestock. Lorenzetti gives us a vivid and gently comic sense of the interdependency of city and country, but also of the city as a place that grows out of country soil, and grows away from the country as it grows up.



COURTESY J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM

Washington Square Park Fountain with pedestrians, circa 1855

New York has certainly inspired its share of coming-to-the-city adventures. One of the most striking is a short story by Willa Cather called "Paul's Case," which first appeared in *The Troll Garden* in 1905. Paul, a high school student in Pittsburgh, is gawky and awkward, with a "certain hysterical brilliancy" in his eyes. A fantasist and a dreamer, he is hopelessly out of sync with the life around him—but he has neither the graces nor the gifts that might enable him to escape from the constricting middle class life on suburban Cordelia Street, where he lives with his father, a widower, and there is nothing but "the loathing of respectable beds, of common food, of a home permeated by kitchen odours." Paul comes alive only in the evenings, when he works as an usher at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Hall, wears a uniform that makes him feel handsome, guides elegant people to their seats, and listens to the music and experiences a "zest for life." Paul is not exactly a music lover; it's the enveloping glamour of the theater that holds him. He loves to visit backstage with the artists; "the stage entrance of the theater was for Paul the actual portal of Romance."

But Paul's father, a dim figure constantly urging on his son the example of more enterprising young men, becomes increasingly enraged by his son's behavior. He pulls him out of the school he barely seems to be attending, forbids the theater to employ him or to let him through the door, and puts him to work at the offices of Denny & Carson. And suddenly Cather jumps forward, to Paul sitting on a train. He has stolen a thousand dollars in cash that he was supposed to deposit in the bank for his employer, and he is on his way to New York.

Arriving in the city, Paul buys expensive clothes, fine luggage, "silver mounted brushes and a scarf-pin" at Tiffany's. He takes a luxurious suite at the Waldorf, and for a few days he exults in his sitting room, which he fills with flowers, in the perfectly appointed bathroom, in the elegance of the hotel dining room, in carriage rides up Fifth Avenue. He knows that it will only be a matter of days before his crime is discovered and he is tracked down. All over New York, the snow is falling. Paul's "chief greediness," Cather writes, "lay in his ears and eyes, and his excesses were not offensive ones. His dearest pleasures were the gray winter twilights in his sitting-room; his quiet enjoyment of his flowers, his clothes, his wide divan, his cigarette and his sense of power." As soon as he "entered the dining-room and caught the measure of the music," he was "lightened by his old elastic power of claiming the moment, mounting with it, and finding it all sufficient." He exults in "the glare and glitter about him." He is cosseted in a magical world. And when he is down to his last hundred dollars, he knows the game is up. He leaves New York, lies down on a train track in New Jersey, and lets the end come.

In Cather's story, New York is less a place that a person can actually inhabit than a kind of luxurious illusionist's trick, centering on the Waldorf and the city avenues, and united by the snow that softens the views out the windows and carpets everything. In "Paul's Case" New York is not a living city so much as it is a fantasy, a stage set. Like the heroes of many nineteenth-century novels, Cather had come from the hinterlands and triumphed in New York; she knew how to negotiate the place. (In "Coming, Aphrodite!", one of her tales of the artist's life, she gave a detailed picture of Greenwich Village bohemians.) In "Paul's Case," though, New York is not real to the protagonist; it is a figment. This is, preternaturally, the adolescent city, a reflection of a hyperbolic mood, an icy fever dream. And the New York of "Paul's Case" can be read emblematically, I think, as the city of the artist's imagination, which is often some version of the adolescent city—not a complex heterogeneous universe, but an onslaught of vividly unique elements that are given, through the force of ego and appetite, a singular, striking character.

New York inspires expressions that are intense, willful, buoyant, brilliant, fragmentary, or melodramatic. Narrowness tends to trump variety. Variety flirts with chaos. Juxtaposition is more common than synthesis. Perspectives are deep before they are wide. The city encourages in art and literature a spirit that is at once intoxicated and oblivious, daringly vivid and maddening self-referential. If this striking combination of elements leads you to think that, yes, New York is the adolescent city, then this characterization surely suggests all kinds of value judgments, about youth, with its energy and its self-regard.

Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*, one of the classic New York stories, is about the calamitous downside of the adolescent city. Tommy Wilhelm, Bellow's middle-aged protagonist, is the screwed-up eternal adolescent, battered by life along the narrow corridor of upper Broadway,

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where he begs money from his father to no avail, falls for con artists, yells at his ex-wife on the phone. "You've got to stop thinking like a youngster," she tells him. And Dr. Tamkin, who drags Wilhelm into a hopeless futures deal, tells him that "From Euclid to Newton there was straight lines. The modern age analyzes the wavers." New York is all wavering, careening, confusing situations. The very streetscape is a matter of juxtapositions. Tommy's father, Dr. Adler, sits in a corner of the hotel dining room, with a view across Broadway. "On the other side of the street was a supermodern cafeteria with gold and purple mosaic columns. On the second floor a private-eye school, a dental laboratory, a reducing parlor, a veteran's club, and a Hebrew school shared the space." No wonder writers and artists use the city's raw materials to create a world of paradoxes, contrasts, extremes.

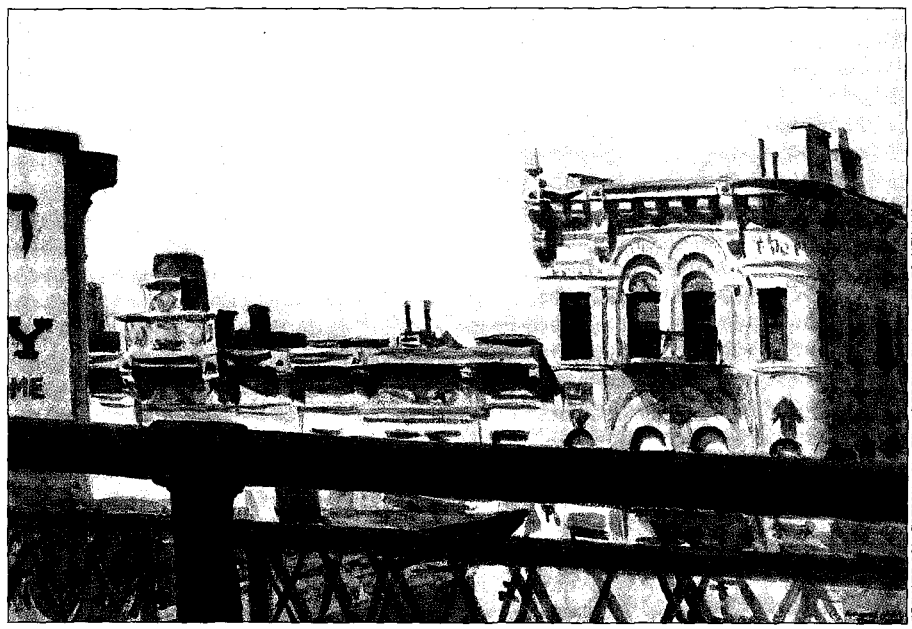
New York, maybe more than London or Paris or Rome, appears in art and literature as pure metaphor—as the sign or symbol of triumph, of loneliness, of romance. Edward Hopper, who produced some of the most indelible images of the city, is an allegorical realist. The city of *Early Sunday Morning*, *New York Movie*, and *Nighthawks* is a matter of singular, insistently observed details: the specifics of a barbershop pole, the degree to which a window shade or curtain is opened or closed, the particular set of the movie usher's arms and head. The relationship between the artist and the city is so exaggeratedly specific that surprise and adventure are all but excluded, with the result that city life becomes chillingly ritualized. Today Hopper's New York can look more like a small town than any metropolis we know, but this may be a function of the transformations that he wrought on the city rather than of the changes that have actually taken place in Manhattan in the many decades since he worked.

Hopper's New York is New York reduced to a few circumstances that bulk large in a city dweller's mind: the façade of the building across the street, the face of the person whom you see but don't speak to in the building where you live or work. His late- night coffee drinkers and anonymous movie usher have their origins in Parisian painting, in the people who, alone or in couples, sit on the banquettes in the cafés of Manet and Degas and Lautrec—but Hopper gives to these figures an exaggerated symbolist melancholy that also owes something to Picasso's Blue Period reinterpretations of the café scene. Hopper's New York is symbolist sociology. *Nighthawks*, the 1942 painting of a tiny clutch of people in a diner deep in the night, is known to be based on a Greenwich Village restaurant, but Hopper's canvas is not a straight transcription. A dozen years after Hopper painted *Nighthawks*, he explained that the painting was based on an all-night coffee place on Greenwich Avenue, "only more so." That "only more so" is one of the cornerstones of the New York aesthetic. The city necessitates intensifications and magnifications.

III.

New York is a magnifying mirror that people like to study when times are good, which is one of the reasons why books and exhibitions about New York have been appearing in great numbers in recent years. There are other reasons for the upsurge. The hundredth anniversary of the consolidation of Manhattan and the four other boroughs into greater New York, celebrated in 1998, was a spur to publishers and museums. More generally, there is a millennial interest in how Americans were or imagined that they were. This non-stop nostalgia craze has made World War II a hot topic and boosted Norman Rockwell's reputation, and no doubt it has also added to New York's historical shimmer. For the past few years the entire country has seemed to be toasting itself. Where better to lift a glass than in mad Manhattan?

This season the Metropolitan Museum of Art offered a sort of prequel to New York's current prosperity in the form of a vast exhibition called "Art and the Empire City: New York, 1825–1861." The show was said to demonstrate "how New York became a world city and assumed its vital role as the visual arts capital of the nation—a position it retains as we enter the twenty-first century." The exhibition, which focused on the city from the opening of the Erie Canal to the beginning of the Civil War, was a celebration of material culture, and it was scaled big. There were a number of good paintings, some that New Yorkers had painted and others that they had brought home from Europe. There was imposing furniture, ranging from the elegantly stolid Empire of the early years to the wildly plushy and overdecorated neo-rococo couches of the middle of the century that, whatever the refinements of the workmanship, will never be anything but ostentation incarnate. There were dresses and glassware and daguerreotypes and a first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. A marble fireplace mantle from 1851, carved end-to-end with lush foliage and scenes from the eighteenth-century pastoral novel *Paul et Virginie*, is like a children's book come to opulent three-dimensional life and has to be counted as some kind of kitsch classic, so obsessively wrought that it achieves its own kind of overdetermined beauty.



PRIVATE COLLECTION COURTESY BERRY-HILL GALLERIES, NEW YORK

Edward Hopper, "The Lily Apartments," 1926

Despite all the remarkable material that was on view at "Art and the Empire City," visitors would have probably been hard put to define with much precision the nature of a New York style. I am not sure to what degree a similar exhibition dealing with Boston in the same span of years would have underscored stylistic distinctions between the two cities or clarified the old assumption that New York is mercantile while Boston is aristocratic. Where spirit of place is concerned, first impressions are maybe best impressions, and all we have to go on is our admittedly vague feeling that there is something intensified, hyperbolized about the art of New York. You feel this even in the Hudson River landscape paintings that emerged in those years and are among the

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most impressive American canvases in "Art and the Empire City." They tend to have a denser impact than romantic landscapes done in Europe during the same period. Thomas Cole's paintings of the Catskills, with their quickening rhythms and homegrown baroque force, may have more of what one would think of as a New York sensibility than any image of the city itself painted or drawn in those years.

No question about it, "Art and the Empire City" was good popular museum entertainment, but there is a limit to the amount of social history that can be conveyed in the galleries of a museum. Such a show can function like a movie that is set in the past: the period takes on a pleasurably ungrounded quality. After seeing "Art and the Empire City," therefore, one might want to dip into a couple of chapters of *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*, by Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace. Burrows and Wallace's book—which appeared around the time of the 1998 anniversary of the city's consolidation, with volume two still on the way—is huge and daunting, but the authors have found an easy-going, conversational way to guide us through a vast range of material. They pull you into the saga without burying you in it, and that is an achievement. You feel their avidity; the details in their huge canvas are boldly rendered. But then New York seems to inspire scholars who have an openhearted, unstuffy enthusiasm for their subject: *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, edited by Kenneth T. Jackson, is also more than a thousand pages long.

If one thing is certain, it is that there is no getting to the bottom of New York—which may explain why even after going through the thousand pages of *Writing New York: A Literary Anthology*, another book published in time for the consolidation centenary, you may feel that you barely know the first thing about literary New York. Edited by Phillip Lopate, this special large-format publication of the Library of America is an impressive collective portrait of the city that ranges from the very famous—E. B. White's "Here is New York"—to writings that are wonderful revelations, such as the Cuban writer José Martí's essay about the city during the huge blizzard of 1888. Martí's report catches the city's fearless, headlong response to catastrophe, the population's insistence on always going forward. Here, as in Cather's "Paul's Case," a blanket of snow underscores the city's fantastical nature.

You read Martí's report—written for the Buenos Aires paper *La Nación*—and you recognize that in some sense New York never changes. "For two days," Martí writes, "the snow has had New York in its power, encircled, terrified, like a prize fighter driven to the canvas by a sneak punch. But the moment the attack of the enemy slackened, as soon as the blizzard had spent its first fury, New York, like the victim of an outrage, goes about freeing itself of its shroud." Martí's essay can be read as a fairy tale about New York's insane, indomitable spirit. "Without milk, without coal, without mail, without newspapers, without streetcars, without telephone, without telegraph, the city arose today." But it seems that it's the lack of news that really provokes New York. "What eagerness on the part of those living uptown to read the newspapers, which, thanks to the intrepidity of the poor newsboys, finally came up from the downtown presses!" And, Martí adds, four theaters managed to open last night. That is the thing about New Yorkers: they insist on being entertained. One can argue with this or that selection in *Writing New York*, but the trajectory of the volume, from Philip Hone's deliciously matter-of-fact diary entries from the 1830s and 1840s all the way to James Schuyler's and Frank O'Hara's poems jammed with urbane incident a century and a quarter later, is a wonderful, satisfying journey.

IV.

For artists and writers, the big question is always what New York can do for them; but for the public that takes an interest in the city, the big question is almost exactly the reverse. What can the artist or the writer do for New York? There is a tendency, among book buyers and gallerygoers, to regard paintings or stories or poems that deal with New York less as personal expressions than as collective ones, as aspects of the city's culture or history, and even as reflections of national experience. For many readers, for example, Alfred Kazin's peerlessly romantic memoir of growing up in Brooklyn, *A Walker in the City*, belongs not so much to Kazin as to New York. And it is a part of the genius of this first volume of Kazin's memoirs, with its bold recollections of an immigrant family in Brownsville, that he plays on an adolescent's instinct to turn every "I" into a "we." Kazin zeroes in on the whole urban dream of enlarging yourself by becoming a piece of the story of the metropolis. Even before Kazin describes, on the very first page, the smell of the Brownsville subway entrance, with "the leak out of the men's room, then the pickles from the stand just below the subway steps," he has quoted from Blake's "London," as if to tell us that this New York story is going to echo with "every cry of every man."

The writer or the artist who takes on the city can become the city—if not in his or her own mind, then in the mind of the public. You can be sure that the thousands of people who have hung in their homes poster-size versions of Saul Steinberg's famous *New Yorker* cover from 1976, the one that offers a view westward across Manhattan, with the rest of the country as a mere twinkle in the city's eye, are less interested in Saul Steinberg than in New York and what it means to them. Steinberg brought a European's eager eye for stylistic discriminations to bear on the crazy jamboree of New York; he gave Manhattan his own kind of crackling, eyebrows-raised, sophisticated acerbic spirit. His New York is nobody else's—and yet his view of the city is widely accepted as being almost impersonal, the illustration of some ineluctable truth about the self-absorption of city dwellers, or, perhaps, about the degree to which the whole country sees (or refuses to see) the city as its conscience, its omnivorous mind, sucking up mental space.

Big cities, when they are represented in art and literature, can function as Rorschach tests, raising complex and contradictory reactions even in people who live far from their streets. Almost anybody can read some sort of mirror of private ambitions or disappointments or desires in Whitman's descriptions of the faces that he sees as he walks the streets and rides the ferry, and in Melville's fearfully solitary scrivener, and in Hopper's modest restaurants, and in Stieglitz's glittering panorama of midtown skyscrapers. The city becomes a startling magnification of ego and id. No wonder New York exists in a tension with the rest of the United States, as a place where national characteristics are experienced through their absence, or in extremis—sometimes so much in extremis that they are unrecognizable to the rest of the country.

In 1927, Ford Madox Ford published a book called *New York Is Not America*, which is true. But it is also true that New York is America—the United States hyperbolized. For the city can be seen as even more ambitious than the country, even more heterogeneous. This is why New York, like Paris before it, is such an inevitable setting for songs and movies about love. New York is all about extreme experiences, about moments when people feel that they are absolutely in the swing of things. But the hyperbolic city is also the nightmare capital, the place where things will go wrong if they can, the setting of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*.

New York is life in italics, and thus it is a place that can epitomize a period. A few weeks ago, when John V. Lindsay died, the papers were full of photographs of the lanky patrician populist with the face of an openhearted Apollo standing amid the

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city's citizens, and the realities of a mayoral career that had been dogged by fiascos large and small were suddenly transformed into a nimble metaphor for the frantically, gorgeously optimistic mood of a certain moment in the 1960s. A city that has always attracted wildly ambitious dreamers can magnify a period sense, and the work that photographers and writers and artists do can be a part of the magnification. If New York in the 1990s—so much sleeker and safer than it had been fifteen years earlier—italicized a more general American prosperity, then the reverse is also true. Depression New York, as seen in the photographs of Ben Shahn (which are the subject of an exhibition organized at Harvard and now touring the country) can feel like Depression America, only more so. The urban theater goes on, only now with threadbare costumes and hungry actors, and at least the bad times are shared with all the people that you meet in the streets, though this is probably no comfort to the men sprawled asleep on the pavements whom Shahn photographed again and again.

V.

Some of the fascination of the poems, the stories, the essays, the paintings, the prints, and the photographs of New York is documentary; but objectivity is the least of what we want from artists or writers who approach the city. For the pleasure of facts and figures we can go to mapmakers and census takers and guidebooks. These vivid cultural artifacts may tell us things about the city which do not concern free-spirited artists—things too obvious or mundane, too much a matter of common record. Extraordinarily creative people are arguably almost incapable of being straightforward about the surroundings that are not only in their eyes and ears, but in their bones, in their imaginations. They cut through the material, and then stitch it together into a shape that feels right to them.

For many artists and writers, a great city is a combination of fantasy and reality, of the city as dream or idea or ideal and the city as day-to-day, moment-to-moment fact. The fascination of the art of the city is in the way that various opposites not only collide but also merge, fuse, transform. To be sure, all art and literature involves opposition, fusion, transformation; but the strange thing about the city as a subject, at least when compared to a landscape or a figure, is that the city is man-made in some of the same ways as a picture or a poem. This explains why art and literature that deal with the city can be so curiously, thrillingly self-referential. And New York may be, artistically speaking, the most self-referential metropolis of all.

London and Paris grew step by step into the metropolises that we know. New York decided to become a metropolis, and therefore it is probably more self-conscious than London or Paris, more inclined to contemplate the idea of itself. Burrows and Wallace show how New York embraced the idea of the flâneur—of the disinterested, artistically inclined wanderer in the city, of what they call "city watching." Already in the 1830s, they explain, "New Yorkers loved [the] European flâneurs"—writers such as Pierce Egan, whose *Life in London* described two young men's wanderings through London high and low in 1821. New Yorkers "bought American reprints of Egan's *Life in London*, perused city sketches in the *London Quarterly* and *Edinburgh Review*, and devoured Dickens. Their own city, alas, was not deemed flâneurable."

But this rapidly changed. By the 1840s Nathaniel Parker Willis was publishing accounts of his peregrinations around the city (some of which are reprinted in Lopate's *Writing New York*). Willis sits at a window, ticking off the hourly changes in the crowds along Broadway: the "comparatively deserted" sidewalk at eight in the morning; the "discount-seekers crowding into the Chemical Bank" at noon; at five, the "dandies strolling and stealing an occasional look at their loose *demi-saison* pantaloons and gaiter-shoes, newly sported with the sudden advent of warm weather." This, along with the work of other writers, foreshadows Walt Whitman's fluid view of the sidewalk and the ferry, a view which will in turn affect so many European writers.

In New York, the flâneur does not so much reflect on the city as he experiences the city as a reflection of himself. This gloriously narcissistic idea may have originated with Whitman, who is New York's essential poet-flâneur, and perhaps the city's quintessential artist. Whitman would like us to imagine that he celebrates the variety of all things, and surely he exults in the extravagant urban panoply. But who can doubt that Whitman regards all of the New Yorkers whom he admires as emanations of his own large-heartedness, his own openness, his own spirit—as aspects of the kaleidoscopic density of his own imagination? The New York of *Leaves of Grass*, which Whitman takes in as he is "sauntering the pavement or crossing the ceaseless ferry" is the poet's vast, unfurling, cycling daydream. He sees all those faces. And what does he think?

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the voter .. the politician,
The emigrant and the exile .. the criminal
that stood in the box,
He who has been famous, and he who
shall be famous after today,
The stammerer.... the well-formed
person .. the wasted or feeble person.

The city—the whole country, really—becomes a reflection of Whitman's psychic generosity.

The flâneur is in some respects the eternal adolescent: observing, checking things out, seeing what's in it for him, gobbling up experiences, moving on. But the New York flâneur, who is not world-weary in the way of his European counterparts, is more purely a figure in his youth. The New York artist or writer is quick or fluid or intense, intoxicated by strange fragments and bold summations, by anything that is not clearheadedly, broad-mindedly analytical. And during the hundred years of the city's most extraordinary growth—from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century—New Yorkers were always finding new ways to exult in Manhattan's deathless youth.

VI.

AT THE BEGINNING of *The Confident Years*, a volume in his still impressive but now virtually unread literary history of the United States, Van Wyck Brooks refers to New York in 1886 as "half provincial still, a metropolis at the awkward age, a sprawling young world city that sometimes suggested London, sometimes Vienna." One may realize with a jolt that this is already a generation after the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, a book whose youthful avidity seems to provoke a kind of Biblical knowingness that one would think had by the last years of the nineteenth century changed into something else. But for the critic James Huneker, the subject of these pages of Brooks's history, the city is still just getting going. And, stranger still, there are elements of Brooks's description—his talk of the "metropolis at the awkward age," of "the sprawling young world city"—that could come to mind when contemplating the New York of 1925 and maybe even the city of 1945.

This is a city whose artists luxuriate, time and again, in a newfound wisdom, a seemingly infinitely reenactable first bliss of discovery. Paul Rosenfeld, in *Port of New York*, says that if at last "to-day men on American land are commencing to come into relationship with one another and with the places in which they dwell, it is through the labor of some dozens of artist hands." A generation later Cyril Connolly, in New York to prepare a special American issue of the English magazine *Horizon*, wonders what might happen if "the wonderful *jeunesse* of America were suddenly to retain their idealism and vitality and courage and imagination into adult life." Connolly goes on to observe that "if Paris is the setting for romance, New York is the perfect city in which to get over one, to get over anything. Here the lost *douceur de vivre* is forgotten and the intoxication of living takes its place."

There is an impulsive, improvisational attitude that you find in many artists and writers in New York, a sense that the slate can always be wiped clean, that you can always begin again. The point is not that the New York artist or writer is less capable of depth, clarity, or a sophisticated sense of the past. But there is perhaps a more dramatic sense, a heightened and simplified sense, of how the new stands in relation to the old. In New York the past is relatively shallow, easily swept away. It is not, as in Europe, a standard by which to measure the present. The artist's or the writer's essential reference point is always now—and *me*. New York obviously has its extreme contrasts in education, wealth, and all the rest; but you do not have the feeling that New York artists and writers, like their European colleagues, use society's distinctions of education, wealth, and class to suggest how the past manifests itself in the present, as a template through which to order experience in the way that Balzac and Dickens do.

Of course, there is no artist or writer who has ever described or evoked all the intricacies of London or Paris; but it can be argued, I think, that such completeness has much more rarely seemed possible—or desirable—among the artists and the writers of New York, who are specialists in fragments, episodes, slices, juxtapositions. In Edith Wharton's fiction, we find the most penetrating glimpses of a certain social milieu, but the sense of the city as a totality is not really there. Wharton's accomplishment has something to do with her calculated parochialism, with the limited range of her perceptions; she conveys the intensity, sometimes suffocating, of monied New York and the lives of those who cannot make it there. She knows only what she sees in front of her and inside her; she knows it with the intensity of youth. Even in the detective fiction set in New York, you will find nothing that does for the city what Georges Simenon does for Paris in the Inspector Maigret series, in which each book contains a perfect delineation of a part of the city, with exact descriptions of where each person came from, of how they intersect with their neighborhood and their neighbors. At a conference held in New York a few months ago called "Tough Guys, Tough Gals, Tough City: Private Eye Fiction in New York," scholar after scholar got up to say that the New York of detective fiction was a vague place, the details few, mostly a blur of atmosphere.

Artists and writers know how to reexperience New York's intensified, quickening nature as a structural idea, as an expression that is lyrical before it is novelistic, hyperbolic before it is analytical. In the years after World War II, a number of New York artists recognized that black-and-white could express the city's spirit in a very immediate way, since this was color hyperbolized, pushed to its most extreme state. The tabloid speed of black-and-white—of painting in extremis—was adopted by Willem de Kooning and, a little later, by Franz Kline, as something close to the city's essential spirit. Writers sought similar intensifications. Alfred Kazin says of *Seize the Day* that "the story proceeds by sensations that are as individuated, warm and vivid as they are in romantic poetry, but unfold into a dramatic action."

This idea of the poetic as trumping the novelistic is a theme that runs through E.B. White's "Here Is New York," a piece of writing that is too neatly groomed to be exactly convincing, but does get many things about the city right. "A poem," White writes, "compresses much in a small space and adds music, thus heightening its meaning." And this is how White sees New York, which "is like poetry: it compresses all life, all races and breeds, into a small island and adds music and the accompaniment of internal engines." Whitman came closest to the whole poem, but he tells it from inside his head. Hopper's *Nighthawks*, Bellow's *Seize the Day*, Stieglitz's photographs of the night city, de Kooning's black-and-white paintings from the late 1940s, Crane's *The Bridge*, Frank O'Hara's "The Day Lady Died": all are parts of some very large whole, but each glimpse remains fragmentary in the way that the experience of New York City is and must always be.

De Kooning, who as a young man loved to wander the streets of New York, said that "content is a glimpse"; and the remark, which is generally recognized as a succinct definition of the Abstract Expressionists' attitude toward meaning, can also be interpreted as a description of the meaning of New York. In this sense all art and literature after Whitman is a falling off from his dream of completeness—always a matter of a glimpse, of some representative fragment or element that must stand in for the staggering heterogeneity of a city. On many of those long nighttime walks that he took in the 1930s, de Kooning was accompanied by the photog-

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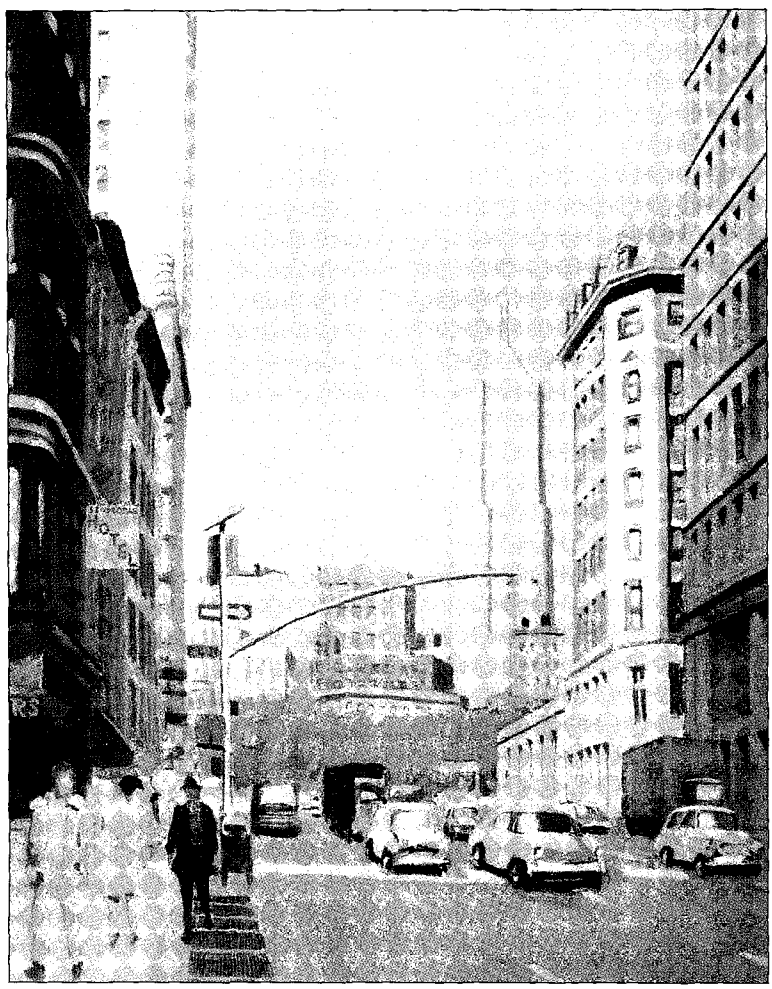
rapher Rudy Burckhardt, and it seems that even a photographer, working in a medium known for its comprehensiveness, could only catch the astonishing pieces of New York. Who can name a New York photographer—and a photographer is always a kind of flâneur—who captures the city with anything like the breadth that Atget brings to Paris? Atget photographed all of Paris and its surroundings, everything from crowded shop windows and weedy courtyards to opulent drawing rooms and formal garden, and he managed to convey a sense of a city as a puzzle in which each piece has its own remarkable import and fits in with many other pieces. Atget's kind of almost lyrically sociological approach has been attempted in New York by, among others, Berenice Abbott, who was in fact responsible for rescuing Atget's negatives after his death.

Abbott did some telling portraits of Greenwich Village, but the detailed, taxonomic approach to the city as a total organism was ultimately beyond her. And beyond any other New York photographer, too. New York's photographers give us only a piece of the action: Lewis Hine's overburdened immigrants and solid working men, Alfred Stieglitz's gleaming skyscrapers. Later photographers regard the streetscape, with its fast-moving figures, as a kind of dance in which individuals throw themselves into the dynamic choreography of relationships, of groups. Burckhardt, as well as Lisette Model, Helen Levitt, William Klein, Weegee, and Robert Frank, grasps a city-dweller's shifting moods and the dramatic sweep of the street, but rarely seems interested in how things fit together. This is not just a function of smaller cameras and faster shutter speeds: Henri Cartier-Bresson, using the same equipment, achieves a very different sense of urban relationships, a sense of them as more fine-tuned.



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Fairfield Porter, "Broadway South of Union Square," 1976

VII.

To say that poetic brevity is truer to the spirit of New York than novelistic discursiveness is perhaps only to say that the city has grown up with the modern movement—with the fractured masterworks of Baudelaire and Picasso and Satie. Then again, modern art and literature were invented not in New York but in Europe, and this has given New York's relationship with modern ideas a special character, less a question of a gradually developing, long-running alliance than of a series of secret assignations, passionate encounters, dramatic elopements, long affairs, emotional marriages and divorces. To read about art and literature in New York in the 1890s or the 1920s or the 1940s is to find the city, again and again, falling in love with some modern idea. The city's artists and writers have embraced Realism, Symbolism, Imagism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Objectivism, Constructivism, Surrealism, saying each time: "Where have you been all my life?" Like the man or woman who is so inherently attractive as to look terrific in the fashions of each changing season, this city has the éclat to show to advantage a whole variety of modern moods, as if they were all facets of Manhattan's unconventional, essential beauty.

Of course there can also be something psychotic about New York's protean, elastic spirit. The city that asks "Where have you been all my life?" is the city that is always looking for a makeover. In New York, modernity does not just flirt with pathology; at times it becomes a form of pathology. The artist or the writer who says that he or she lives in New York but ignores the city is not necessarily being disingenuous. Many creative people stick to their daily neighborhood routines as if they are local traditions that can hold the city's fast-forward, tradition-annihilating sensibility in check. One of the reasons why Manhattan can be such an exhausting and draining experience for artists and writers is that the city is constantly demanding that somebody—anybody—find it beautiful in a newer and more surprising way.

And beautiful New York is, with a miraculous meeting of architecture and geography that can, on its own utterly distinct terms, match the provocative urbanism of Paris or Rome. Fairfield Porter caught some of that quality in the cityscapes that he did in the 1960s and 1970s, in which the balance-in-imbalance between small cars or figures and the vast, impersonal bulk of buildings is sustained through Porter's sense of the city's generous and resolute light, which bathes each view in almost comically pastel tones. Porter gets at the degree to which New York must be experienced as a concerto form, with the complicated autonomy of the individual performer juxtaposed with the vast orchestrations of the architectural environment. Relatedness always has an off-balance quality in Manhattan, for New Yorkers are at once romantics and empiricists, and the tension between those two attitudes gives a lilt, a tug, a tension to many portraits of the city.

The compressed shape of Manhattan island, the grid of streets, the bedrock out of which the buildings rise to staggering heights, the brilliant light glancing from the surrounding rivers—all of this is a wonder to which writers turn again and again. In Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*, Phineas P. Blackhead "pushed up the wide office window. He stood looking out over the harbor of slate and mica in the uneven roar of traffic, voices, racket of

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building that soared from the downtown street bellying and curling like smoke in the stiff wind shoving down the Hudson out of the northwest." And Hart Crane, in "The Harbor Dawn," sees how

> The window goes blond slowly. Frostily clears.
> From Cyclopean towers across Manhattan waters
> —Two—three bright window-eyes aglitter, disk
> The sun, released—aloft with cold gulls hither.

There may be as many seagulls and pigeons in the literature of New York as there are angels in the art of Rome.

WRITERS ARE ADEPT at softening the city's geometry. Artists sometimes have a more difficult time. Indeed, New York's geometrical nature can be a conundrum for painters, for it is so obviously an abstraction that those who take up its implications almost inevitably fall into an artsy obviousness. The stylized images of skyscrapers and bridges by Georgia O'Keeffe, Joseph Stella, and Charles Sheeler are not their best works, for here the artists seem almost in cahoots with the Art Deco city, not responding to its dream machine but simply keeping the dream running—sleek, efficient, a little dull. John Marin does much better, by giving the buildings a personal Expressionist tilt, a vantage point all his own. But only Mondrian, in *Broadway Boogie Woogie*—completed in 1943, after he had arrived in New York, a refugee from wartime Europe—found a way not to abstract the city's already abstract grid but to forge an intensely emotional alliance between an artist's revolutionary vision and a city's essence.

Mondrian's verticals and horizontals and primary colors are a distillation of painting's possibilities, a new way to express all the pressures and counterpressures of life. In *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, he does not dissect New York so much as he discovers that New York has some mystical existence within a pictorial vision that came of age in his studio in Paris some twenty years earlier. Under the impact of Manhattan, Mondrian complicated his utterance, fragmenting and multiplying his rectilinear forms until *Broadway Boogie Woogie* takes on some of Whitman's rhythmic stress and expansiveness. Could it be that this is Whitman re-imagined after Constructivism? You can never get to the end of this painting; the imagery keeps re-forming, transmogrifying. Most moving in *Broadway Boogie Woogie* are the intervals where Mondrian interrupts the pulsing rows of red, yellow, and blue rectangles with larger rectangles-within-rectangles that give a startlingly vivid sense of particularity and locality, of moments of slowdown or rest within the painting's ever-quickening pace.

Broadway Boogie Woogie was Mondrian's last completed work, a grand conclusion that is also, from the vantage point of the iconography of New York, a pioneering effort. But in New York the modern movement in art and literature is by definition not a conclusion but a starting point—an initial proposition. Manhattan is the first city in which the touchstones of modern artistic and literary experience—the fragment, the collage, the abstract icon—are experienced not as an epilogue to other styles, but as virtually the beginning of everything. Definitiveness is rarely what one thinks of as the salient quality of art and literature in New York. This is not to say that the city has not produced its share of magnificently crafted works and its own kinds of classical statements; but New York's spirit is some confounding mix of empiricism and romanticism, joined together by the insouciance and the daring of youth.

Ford Madox Ford remarked that "one hears eternally that New York is not America. It is obviously not Europe—the Atlantic lies between. Is it, then, the outer fringe of America—or the end of Europe? Perhaps, the one overlapping the other, here we have the beginning of the world." This pronouncement, three quarters of a century old, may not be out-of-date. Perhaps everything that has as yet been achieved in art and literature in New York is merely a scattering of early developments—a glorious youth, a glitteringly accomplished adolescence. Of course the thought that art and literature in New York have barely gotten going will send a shiver down many spines, because this does not jibe very easily with the current "been there, done that" mood. But if New York is actually going to have the staying power of London and Paris and Rome, this can lead to one conclusion, which is that art and literature in New York have only just begun. ■

The Shooting Game

By JACKSON LEARS

Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture by Michael A. Bellesiles

(Knopf, 603 pp., $30)

I.

CONVENTIONAL SOOTHSAYERS have fostered a widespread faith that our civilization has broken decisively with the past. Traditional forms of knowledge and communication are now alleged to be irrelevant to our present and our future. The American impulse to deny intellectual ancestry, to jettison the oppressive weight of any ties to the past, has acquired an unprecedented legitimacy. The wisdom of the ages is not worth a plugged nickel in the age of information.

Defenders of historical study still occasionally come forward, often deploying some version of George Santayana's aphorism that "those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." In common journalistic parlance, that opaque and paradoxical utterance becomes merely a utilitarian formula: an assertion that one can extract specific, fact-based lessons from history. But nothing could be more alien to the old ironist; and so Santayana's appropriation by the faux-profound punditocracy is one of the minor ironies of recent intellectual history.

The notion that one can approach history as a compendium of useful lessons is profoundly anti-historical: it involves a failure to recognize the finality of the past, the strangeness of the past, the pastness of the past. As Santayana knew, a remembrance of things past yields an awareness of their distinctness from the present. The uniqueness of each historical moment offers resistance to utilitarians in search of practical knowledge for the present.

So what is the point of studying history? To explore the strangeness and the beauty of the worlds we have lost? To remind our-

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selves of the fragility and the contingency of allegedly timeless ideas, including our own? To counteract the hubris of the present by overcoming temporal provincialism? Those are necessary and honorable tasks. Yet surely there must be more to history's lessons—some capacity to legitimate contested points of view, to inform debate over contemporary moral and political issues. Surely history deserves a place in the public arena.

The problem is how to put it there. The accumulation of factual knowledge is insufficient. For most non-specialists, historical events remain an inert, chaotic muddle unless they are embedded in a compelling narrative. The ablest historians combine memorable stories with subtle interpretations, attracting a wide audience without sacrificing the complexity of past human experience. Yet this formidable task is becoming more daunting all the time. The popular audience is busy and distracted; the postmodern cultural climate deifies surface cleverness and devalues patient reflection. The gap between scholarly research and commercial mythmaking has always been large, but it has widened in recent decades, as middlebrow culture contracts, and mass-marketed images saturate popular consciousness, and liberal arts education yields to corporate job training. What too often becomes the official story of a nation's past—the one allowed entry into the public arena—is the version most consistent with ideological fashion, whose backers command enough resources to make it seem persuasive.

IN POSTMODERN PUBLIC discourse, scholarship succumbs to show biz. And some of the ablest practitioners of such postmodern history are the people who call themselves conservatives. The self-proclaimed defenders of tradition are really a posse of mythographers. The "tradition" that they defend is usually a pastiche of invented traditions: a usable past culled from scraps of Movietone newsreels, Frank Capra films, and *Life* magazines. Out of such dross the American right has spun pure gold: the postmodern conservative narrative of American identity has demonstrated its power over a large part of our population, though the bulk of it is fantasy. Its heroes are men who played heroes in the movies: John Wayne, whose biography was a main selection of the Conservative Book Club, and Ronald Reagan, who convincingly simulated a president for eight years and is now on his way to historical canonization. Such icons may account for the sometimes hallucinatory quality of postmodern conservatism.

Perhaps the most influential mythic narrative composed by the contemporary right is the story of Americans and their guns. It is a Turnerian tale of frontier self-reliance. In British colonial North America, the story goes, boys learned to shoot almost as soon as they could wipe themselves. They had to: as men they would need good marksmanship to hunt food for their families, and to protect them from Indians and other hostile creatures. There was a flintlock over every fireplace. Small wonder that the colonial militia became such a fearsome fighting force; it was composed of crack shots, citizen soldiers who would learn guerrilla warfare from the Indians and practice it to perfection on the hapless British redcoats in the Revolution. Following the revolutionaries' victory, the Second Amendment to the Constitution affirmed every individual's right to bear arms—a right that has remained crucial to the protection of personal liberty against intrusive government power.

The power of this narrative (backed by millions of dollars in advertising from the National Rifle Association) has been demonstrated repeatedly, most recently in this year's presidential election. From time to time, to be sure, scholars have questioned aspects of the gun narrative, particularly its constitutional claims. But no one has taken on the conventional wisdom as thoroughly as Michael Bellesiles in *Arming America*. He has created a debunking counternarrative the old-fashioned way, by means of exhaustive reseach. Whether research is enough to discredit postmodern conservatism remains to be seen.

II.

ACCORDING TO BELLESILES, guns were scarce and unreliable in British North America, and the colonists themselves were a peaceful people—except when they were attacking the indigenous inhabitants. Then the main burden of battle was borne by soldiers using axes and pikes and fire, rather than muskets. (Even if they were available, muskets were poorly maintained and liable to misfire or explode at awkward times.) "The fable of the family musket above the mantel ready for use simply will not pass muster," Bellesiles writes. Hunters preferred traps to firearms, and most colonists fed themselves by domesticating animals, not by shooting them. As for the vaunted militia, it was consistently inept, a constant source of frustration to regular Army men. The lesson that they drew from the Revolution and the War of 1812 was that the new nation needed a professional army—not a feckless band of louts (as Bellesiles describes them) who could barely hit the side of a barn door, even on the rare occasions when they were sober.

Through the early nineteenth century, a strong pacifist streak persisted in American society, and it helped to foster continued distrust of guns. They were regarded, as they had been in colonial times, as fit objects for government control and regulation. Indeed, the Second Amendment itself, in Bellesiles's reading, was not meant to sanction individual gun ownership. Quite the contrary: it was designed to "continue the legal British tradition of controlling the supply of and access to firearms." The emergence of a popular gun culture awaited the coming of the Civil War, when technological improvements made rifles and pistols more efficient means of slaughter, and military service acquainted the male population with their use.

This is not the sort of tale that will be picked up by the Conservative Book Club. Nor will anyone be bidding for the movie rights any time soon. From the outset, Bellesiles acknowledges that he has come to unmask myths, not to create them. "The power of image and myth repeatedly overwhelms reality in discussions of early American firearms," he complains. For Bellesiles, reality began to assert itself when he was researching early American probate records and noticed a curious absence: almost none of the estate inventories contained any guns. From there he moved to other forms of evidence, and eventually he concluded nothing less than that "America's gun culture is an invented tradition."

IN RECENT DECADES the exposure of invented traditions has become a cottage industry among historians, but this particular discovery has obvious and immediate political resonance. If Bellesiles is right, the roots of individual gun ownership in the United States are much shallower than either the NRA or its opponents have suspected. "That which was once thought exceptional is now routine," Bellesiles writes. "That which was once perceived as subject to communal regulation is now seen as an individual right. There exists a fear of confronting the specifics of these cultural origins, for what has been made can be unmade."

But how easy is that task? Here we confront the nub of the problem raised by Bellesiles's book. According to some of the historians quoted on the dust jacket of *Arming America*, the impact of Bellesiles's research has already shaken the gun lobby to its foundations. "This book changes everything," one proclaims. "The way we think about guns and violence in America will never be the same." So we can hope. But it is still unclear how—or even whether—this work of history, or any work of history, will affect the debate about public policy.

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A part of the ambiguity is owed to the problematic nature of Bellesiles's evidence. Despite his wide range, the core of his argument depends on statistics: government censuses of militia members and a sample of probate records—a thousand estate inventories in 40 counties, spanning the period from 1765 to 1859. Until about 1830, Bellesiles finds, guns appeared in only 15 to 17 percent of the inventories; after that date they rose gradually, to 32.5 percent in 1859. These numbers are certainly provocative, but can easily be called into question. Many inventories were incomplete; many estates were not probated; many guns were probably not reported at all.

Bellesiles acknowledges the limitations of such evidence, but its problems go beyond incompleteness. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., put the case against quantitative social science with pardonable hyperbole several decades ago: "almost all important questions are important precisely because they are not susceptible to quantitative answers." (Election results may be the exception that proves the rule.) The important historical question is not how many Americans owned guns, but what guns meant to Americans, whether they owned them or not.

The difficulty involves more than Bellesiles's resort to statistical methods, which despite their shortcomings can provide a useful check on uninformed speculation. A larger problem is the matter-of-fact literalism that pervades *Arming America*. This prevents Bellesiles from asking the larger cultural questions about guns and violence in early American history. To understand (let alone to combat) the power of the NRA narrative, one needs a capacious comprehension of myth and its meanings—its capacity to create coherent cosmologies, to provide inchoate yearnings with a local habitation and a familiar name. For Bellesiles, however, "the militia myth" is merely a pack of lies to be counterposed against the hard facts that he has dredged from the archives. He has little interest in the metaphorical or psychological significance of guns and violence. He sometimes gestures toward that cloudy region, but then he quickly bustles on to provide yet another empirical illustration of Americans' non-ownership of guns or their ineptitude in using them. Neither of those facts, however well documented, undermined the mythic power of guns. In fact, they may have enhanced it.

For a historian of culture, Bellesiles does not sufficiently respect the reality of illusion. His insistent juxtaposition of the mythical and the real creates a curious contradiction at the heart of his story. The realms of fact and fantasy remain constantly at odds. Guns are nearly useless, but they are increasingly in demand. The militia is a muddle, an object of popular contempt, but its mythic power swells. Bellesiles never attempts to clarify this confusing dualism; he never suggests that mythical and realistic notions may have surfaced in different parts of the population, or that they may have coexisted even within the same mind.

The beginnings of a solution to this problem might have been to adopt a larger and less positivist approach—a recognition that myth, too, is an important element of human affairs, and that human motives are more complicated than mere utilitarian aims. Through the sheer accretion of detail, Bellesiles tells a fascinating (if repetitive) story, with important implications; but those implications would have been even more significant if he had supplemented his argument with the rich scholarship in the cultural history of American violence—especially the pioneering work of Richard Slotkin, whose *Regeneration Through Violence* remains the classic work on the subject. As Slotkin and others have shown, the creation of a gun culture involved far more complex issues than the mass marketing of pistols and the spread of opportunities for target practice.

Invented traditions are no less powerful for being invented; the more deeply they tap into fantasies and longings, the more difficult they are to discredit. To counter the likes of Charlton Heston, it is necessary to sift through the emotional subsoil that made guns a central component of American male identity. For all his energy and erudition, Bellesiles mostly scratches the surface of that larger subject. Throughout his account, there is an unacknowledged but tantalizing tension between the impracticality and the inaccessibility of guns, on the one hand, and the desirability of guns, on the other. For the significant cultural fact is that guns in America, whatever their utility or lack of it, have always carried a fetishlike charge.

III.

ABOUT THE IMPRACTICALITY of early guns there can be little doubt. Bellesiles demonstrates the point repeatedly. The flintlock, which was the dominant form of musket from early colonial times until just before the Civil War, was heavy and clumsy. It took several minutes to load, it needed constant cleaning, and it was inaccurate even at close range. Military men distrusted guns.Their weapons of choice were bayonets, axes, and fire—which they used to devastating effect in the scorched-earth campaigns against the Indians. "Victory came not out of the barrel of a gun," Bellesiles writes, "but from barren fields and the smoldering ruins of Indian villages."

The flintlock was no weapon for practical folk, whether soldiers or civilians. It was expensive (two months' pay for a skilled artisan), dangerous, unreliable, and difficult to maintain. No wonder that so few Americans owned guns, or that the ones they did own showed up in probate inventories as "old," "rusty," "broken," or lacking some essential part. Still, the very absence of guns from everyday life accentuated their symbolic potential. In Europe, from the early seventeenth century forward, guns could be a potent status symbol as well as an *objet d'art*; and affluent colonists in America also used guns for social and aesthetic purposes. Bellesiles alludes to guns with detailed metalwork and elaborate carvings, passed from one generation to the next. Guns could be more than mere tools.

Certainly the Indians thought so. They embraced guns fervently from the first European contacts. "By the mid-eighteenth century," Bellesiles declares, "the Eastern Woodlands Indians possessed more firearms per capita than any other society in the world." Guns did not have to be efficient killing machines to suit the Indian conception of warfare, which emphasized display over carnage. As early as the 1650s, the eastern tribes had already begun to learn how even a few guns gave them an enormous psychological advantage in intertribal battle—the point of which, as Bellesiles observes, "was not to kill your opponents, but to make them flee." Muskets and then rifles became fetish-like objects for many Indians. (The Lakota called them "sacred irons.") The comparative inaccessibility of guns intensified their supernatural potential. At the very least, Bellesiles writes, "those Indians who had guns came, like their European counterparts, to feel great self-confidence from holding such a powerful weapon."

For Indians and Europeans alike, guns were sources of social prestige and personal power. Were the American colonists somehow immune to this appeal? It is not clear that they were, even in Bellesiles's account. To be sure, they were farmers, not warriors; but there is significant (if scattered) evidence that even the less affluent American colonists found guns to be something more than mere ineffective detonators of small explosions. As early as the eighteenth century, the gun was already emerging as a symbol of masculine self-worth, its significance shaped by racial animosities, religious commitments, and status anxieties. For at least some white Americans, guns were becoming part of what it meant to be a citizen and a man.

Consider the contradictory significance of gun regulation. Bellesiles rightly inter-

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prets the legislative restrictions on gun ownership as an indication that there was no strong popular sense of an individual "right to bear arms." Quite the opposite. He notes that colonial governments could impress guns at will in an emergency: "no gun ever belonged unqualifiedly to an individual." But the assemblies' gun legislation also revealed who was inside the circle of full citizenship (and full manhood), and who was outside it. At least until the middle of the eighteenth century, only white Protestant property owners could own guns. And not all of them, either: the Antinomians were barred from bearing arms in Massachusetts after they provoked a heresy controversy in 1637. Explicitly racial prohibitions on gun ownership were not confined to the South, though the laws there became stricter than anywhere else.

As Bellesiles admits, the peaceable colonial kingdom was meant for whites only. Violence against Indians was endemic to the settlement enterprise from the outset, and violence against African slaves was becoming an everyday occurrence as slavery spread thoughout the South. As homicide rates indicate, however, white colonists were reluctant to kill one another. The boundaries of bloodshed were being drawn along racial lines, though guns were at first only fitfully involved. As the technology of firearms improved and a gun culture became more overt, race would help to determine the contours of vigilante violence. Meanwhile, the restriction of gun ownership suggested that firearms—however impractical—were important enough to confine to the propertied Protestant few. Despite their apparent near-uselessness, guns possessed significant symbolic power. Eventually they would possess practical power as well. The history of gun regulation is more ambiguous than Bellesiles acknowledges.

So is the history of the militia. As Bellesiles tells it, the narrative is mainly a tale of unrelenting failure. From the 1690s to the 1750s, he writes, the colonial governments experienced "a long crisis in the maintenance of the militia system." They continually passed laws requiring eligible property owners to muster out for drill bearing their own muskets, but colonists showed little enthusiasm for military duty. For them, the militia was a means of sustaining social connections as well as providing opportunities for "regaling and merriment." Militia drill was "a burlesque of everything military." No wonder that the militia was an object of popular contempt by the early eighteenth century, or that American colonists performed so disastrously in the Seven Years War. Contrary to popular mythology, says the military historian John Shy, the American militia were "just as bewildered and even less effective in the forest than the [British] regulars."

Yet the cultural consequences of this catastrophe were the opposite of what one might expect. According to Bellesiles, "the myth of a mighty militia, of 'a people numerous and armed,' ready to spring to battle against any foe, began almost immediately after the Seven Years War." Educated Americans had "picked up fears of a standing army from the Commonwealthmen," the republican critics of court power and corruption whose writings had begun to circulate in the colonies. For republican ideologues, the militia was an alternative to a standing army—but it was an alternative based in fantasy rather than fact. "In fact," Bellesiles insists, "the America militia had proved itself incapable of defeating even a single Indian tribe unless the Indians were Christian pacifists or the colonists were accompanied by hundreds of British regulars and armed by the English government. Not that reality mattered. The myth would inspire many Americans in the belief that they could defeat anyone, even the powerful British empire, in a few months. So potent was American virtue, it seems, that not even a supply of firearms was required. Fortunately, however, the British had left thousands of guns behind in America."

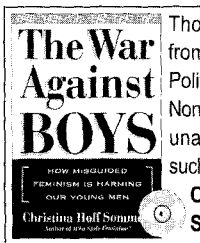
The passage exemplifies the strengths and the weaknesses of Bellesiles's literalist accomplishment. He deftly dispels the fog of myth, but he never probes its persistent power—never wonders why the counterfactual narrative of a triumphant militia proved so inspiring to so many people. Nor does he ponder a central question raised by his own evidence: despite their supposed indifference to firearms, "many Americans saw military service [in the Seven Years War] as an opportunity to own a gun." Perhaps guns were not so useless after all. The colonists' widespread filching of firearms created a chronic arms shortage for the British crown in North America and a crucial cache of weapons for the revolutionary cause.

The revolution itself continued the paradoxical pattern of militia history: failure in fact, apotheosis in myth. Bayonets continued to prove more useful than muskets, and professional soldiers more valuable than militia. George Washington and his military colleagues scorned any notion of dependence on the militia. "The Idea is chimerical," Washington wrote, "an error which the experience of all mankind has exploded...." Yet even Washington encouraged his troops to wear "Hunting Shirts" because "it is a dress justly supposed to carry no small terror to the enemy, who think every such person a complete Marksman." Apparently the British were as deeply in thrall to the militia myth as the Americans.

To Bellesiles's annoyance, the militia ideal persisted "in direct denial of the historical experience." The Continental Army, not the militia, won the war, but Thomas Jefferson and other amateur strategists preferred to "live by the dream rather than the reality." By the time the Constitutional Convention convened in 1787, "a counterfactual faith in the militia had become a core American belief." And the consequences of that faith, as Bellesiles argues convincingly, were the opposite of those imagined by the contemporary right.

Among the Framers of the Constitution, a consensus emerged that Congress should arm the militia to suppress popular uprisings—such as Shays's Rebellion in western Massachusettts, which had already flared up to frighten established elites. Critics of the militia may have thought that the national government could finally whip the irregulars into shape. Delegates agreed with James Madison that the Constitution should authorize Congress to call "forth the Militia to execute the Laws of the Union, suppress Insurrections, and repel Invasions." This became Article 1, section 8 of the Constitution. In the framers' view, the militia was not a check on federal power, it was an arm of federal power.

Government was also heavily—and often disastrously—invested in promoting gun production. In 1795, the brilliant con artist Eli Whitney made a killing on arms procurement contracts (which he never filled) after he persuaded the gullible War Department that he could make guns with interchangeable parts. Yet Alexander Hamilton and other federalists realized that guns were too important to be left to the free market; the chronic arms shortage that occurred in the revolution, they believed, must not be allowed to happen again. Here again one encounters



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the fundamental tension in Bellesiles's account: between the impracticality of guns and the desirability of guns.

For guns were becoming central to the War Department's policy. During the 1790s, the national government itself went into the gun business, at Springfield and Harper's Ferry Arsenals, and it stayed in the business until the 1860s. Contrary to contemporary individualist fantasy, government was involved in controlling the supply of firearms at every stage, from manufacturing to maintenance and distribution. The Second Amendment, Bellesiles argues persuasively, must be seen as an effort to refine and to clarify that control, and not as an affirmation of an individual right to bear arms.

IV.

DESPITE ITS CONSTITUTIONAL warrant, the militia remained a bad joke. General Ebenezer Huntington, a Revolutionary War veteran and a former commander of the Connecticut militia, concluded that "as soldiers they are not worth their rations." By the early 1800s, even such republican ideologues as the Virginia squire John Taylor of Caroline had begun to support a standing army: "national survival had to take precedence over ideological purity." The militia was (again) becoming an object of popular contempt. In 1803, the District of Columbia banned the public heckling of the Washington militia at muster, and the Independence Day parade was canceled for lack of interest.

And yet the militia myth survived, creating a straitjacket for Jeffersonian military policy. The country's reliance on a poorly armed and inept civilian force left it pathetically unprepared for the War of 1812. Where the militia served, it displayed none of the skill at guerrilla warfare that it was alleged to possess. Like the redcoats in the Revolution, the soldiers formed into neat ranks in open fields while the British fired at them from behind trees. A New York commander complained that his men were often "destitute of arms and ammunition." According to Secretary of War John Armstrong, the militia was "very little better than an infuriated mob."

One would have thought that the burning of Washington and other embarrassments would have finally demystified dependence on the militia. But the power of the fantasy endured, partly as a consequence of Andrew Jackson's victory in the battle of New Orleans. This tale, to Bellesiles's consternation, again involved the victory of myth over fact. "Cannon, not firearms, won the battle of New Orleans," he observes. The British, to everyone's amazement, marched straight into American artillery fire, and then waited for scaling ladders to be passed to the front. They were sitting ducks for the cannon that blasted away at them from close range. In the mythic account of the battle, however, the frontier sharpshooter played a central role. As Bellesiles suggests, "the myth of Kentucky riflemen picking which eye of British officers to shoot out fulfilled some deep national yearning."

Here as elsewhere, Bellesiles tantalizes but disappoints. That "deep national yearning" constituted the emotional core of the emerging gun culture, but Bellesiles refuses to dip more than a toe in the muddy waters of collective mythology. Instead he returns to the opposite pole, doggedly documenting the militia's decline into terminal silliness. Despite the fantasies surrounding the Battle of New Orleans, the War of 1812 persuaded the national government to turn decisively toward dependence on a professional army. Despite national yearnings for regenerative riflemen, popular attitudes toward the militia moved "from indifference to disdain." Militia training was "mostly a farce, nothing but an exhibition of rags, caps, and broomsticks," a United States senator from Rhode Island observed in 1842. It was merely "mock military duty," and an excuse (as one Pennsylvanian complained) for "riot, drunkenness, and every species of immorality, which the pageant boobies, called officers, have neither intelligence to anticipate nor intellect sufficient to prevent."

Piling up numerous examples of absurdity, Bellesiles marks the transformation of the militia from a mandatory public duty to a voluntary private club—an excuse for well-to-do young bucks to strut about in fine uniforms, and strike military poses, and drink themselves insensate. Intent on dismissing the militia as a military organization, he overlooks its larger social significance. For, the farcical appearance of drunks on parade notwithstanding, militia membership remained a jealously guarded prerogative of free white males—a significant element of citizenship in the emerging *Herrenvolk* democracy. The volunteer companies satisfied subtler longings for status by confirming men's membership in a local elite. In general, militia units sought to exclude the allegedly inferior or dangerous portions of the population, and—to the extent that they could acquire firearms—they fetishized ritual gun use as a signature of white manhood.

By the 1830s and 1840s, gun ownership had established a firm foothold in America, though on a contested cultural terrain. As Bellesiles makes clear, there were powerful sanctions against violence abroad in the land. Children's literature castigated gun manufacturers for promoting "mutual slaughter" and dismissed even the Revolutionary War as little more than murder. European travelers noted the comparative absence of violence, even on the frontier. In 1837, the British captain Frederick Marryat wrote that "unwillingness to take away life is a very remarkable feature in America." Capital punishment was far less common in the United States than in England, discouraged on this side of the water by the democratic faith that one (white) man was as good as another.

Violence across racial lines was another matter, of course; and it was not accidental that gun ownership surged upward in the South as the fear of slave uprisings intensified. Still, the roots of a true gun culture were beginning to send up shoots in every region. A part of this growth stemmed from the implicitly primitivist fear that civilization was unmanning the civilizer. Almost as soon as the actual frontier began to recede, James Fenimore Cooper and other writers began to replace it with a fictional one. In the emerging frontier mythology, the lone hunter with a rifle embodied the mysterious but evanescent power of the wilderness—a power that would inevitably vanish with the coming of women and families, schools and civilization.

Bellesiles is at pains to demonstrate the factual inaccuracy of this sequence: women and families were on the frontier from the beginning, and even the rudest hamlet made haste to claim its stature as "the Athens of the West." But facts are largely beside the point. Here, as elsewhere in the history of American guns, we are in the realm of fantasy. And so by the 1830s, hunting was being detached from its aristocratic British associations, democratized, and Americanized.

V.

MOST IMPORTANT, "the word 'manly' became ever more intimately linked with the use of a gun," as Bellesiles remarks. In sporting magazines, the language of hunting became flagrantly sensual. Guns were no longer merely held but "cradled," "caressed," "hugged," and "grasped with firmness" to fulfill their "deadly purpose." Many a hunter rhapsodized over his rifle in sexual terms: "she's a beauty," one wrote, "tall and slim, with a sight that would ravish you. Next to Miss ————, I love her better than any thing living." Another disdained any man "silly enough to prefer a *wife* to his *gun*!" A strident masculinity suffused the hunting literature. As early as the antebellum era, hunting with guns had become a temporary male escape from domesticity to masculine commu-

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nity. It was a form of recreational primitivism, "a safe reach into man's primal past."

The transformation of hunting was part of a broad cultural tendency. "During the twenty years before the Civil War," Bellesiles writes, "Americans began constructing an image of themselves as a violent people and to act on that self-perception." This tendency stemmed in part from the emerging primitivist mythology of the frontier, but more palpable forces were at work as well. The rise of Manifest Destiny as an ideology of conquest, and its fulfillment in the Mexican War, provided an unprecedented sanction for state-sponsored violence. At about the same time, vigilantism arose as a popular form of collective violence outside state control—in the slave patrols of the plantation South, and in the volunteer militia companies of the urban North. In the Astor Place riot of 1849 in New York, private militia served—for the first time, but not for the last time—as a weapon of the propertied classes against a multiethnic mob. Existing structures of power helped to clarify troubling questions of masculine identity.

Bellesiles treats these questions gingerly, then drops them. This is understandable: the pitfalls of formulaic thinking and trendy theorizing pervade the historiography of gender. Still, it really is impossible to avoid the subject of masculinity in discussing guns and violence. Gender identities are a complex blend of nature and nurture, at once biologically given and culturally made. Recent historiography has revealed the tensions involved in this project of construction; the trick is to try to understand how they were shaped by particular historical circumstances.

Conventional ideals of manliness (like conventional ideals of womanliness) have always posed problems for idiosyncratic souls. In the fluid market society of the antebellum United States, the meanings of manhood were becoming especially problematic: both more rigid and more open-ended than in colonial times. Traditional ideas of honor, rooted in social hierarchy, were giving way to new definitions of self-worth—more individualistic, more emotionally charged with aspiration and anxiety. Consider *The American Code*, a dueling manual first published in 1838 by a South Carolinian named John Lyde Wilson. His defense of the practice was rooted in Lockean liberalism. In a democratic society, Wilson argued, not only a man's honor but his very livelihood was dependent on his reputation, his capacity to command the respect of other men. The key to his justification of dueling was "the principle of self-preservation." When that principle was compromised, any man would be forced to act: dueling was a necessary self-defense.

Wilson's argument was not simply a Southern rant. He expressed aptly (though extremely) the peculiar permissiveness toward self-defense that has shaped American views of violence for nearly two centuries. Far more insistently than European laws, American laws at all levels had sanctified the individual's right to use his private property in accordance with his own self-interest. Weapons were no exception to this rule. Since the early nineteenth century, an American who believed himself threatened with deadly force could legally respond with deadly force. (An Englishman in similar circumstances was legally obliged to flee.) Even if guns were not widely owned in the early republic, the existing legal codes offered unprecedented sanctions for personal violence.

The sanctity of self-defense reflected Wilson's bleak vision of society—a lonely crowd of anxious, competitive individuals, jealous of their precarious status, jostling for advantage in a brutal world of winners and losers. It was the fragmented underside of egalitarianism, captured brilliantly by Tocqueville when he observed that "not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him within the solitude of his own heart."

Tocqueville's alternative to this "individualism" (as he called it) was the American knack for forming voluntary associations, and most historians have followed him in viewing that impulse as entirely benign. Everything from the Elks club to the PTA has been pressed into service as an example of American ingenuity in creating community and combating anomie. Yet the slave patrols, the private militia companies, and other vigilante groups were also voluntary associations. However provisionally and temporarily, this ideal of armed fraternity enfolded the fragile male self in the comforting embrace of the *Herrenvolk*; it reaffirmed feelings of racial superiority and class solidarity; and it provided opportunities for regeneration through violence.

The cultural preconditions for a national gun mania were present long before the material conditions were in place. The Minié bullet, the Colt revolver, the breech-loading rifle: all these nineteenth-century innovations met with enormous commercial success, even without the impetus of war. During the late 1850s, Bellesiles writes, "gunmakers convinced an ever-wider audience that they needed guns in order to be real Americans." Why they were so easily convinced remains an open question, but a part of the answer involves the fragility of male selfhood in a fluid but racially fragmented market society.

Prospero with Teenagers

How high to hold the hands? One never knows.
Things merely ebb one's way; sea-level is sea,
As art must have its squall's tranquillity.
But the bent hands, I raise them; then let go.

Wyatt Prunty

BY INSTITUTIONALIZING THE gun culture, the Civil War completed a process that had been under way for more than a century. After the war, in the Jim Crow South and in Northern cities torn by labor strife, the vigilante tradition would come into its own, armed with more efficient weapons and animated by more virulent race and class fears. Pistols proliferated during the post-Civil War decades: in Wichita they were "as thick as blackberries," a local newspaper noted in 1874. Mythic justifications for the use of guns multiplied, too. Daniel Chester French's famous sculpture *The Minuteman* (1875) embodied a new wave of longing for imagined militia virtue. The colonial revival of the late nineteenth century sustained the militia myth and complemented the sentimental celebration of the vanishing frontier.

By the middle of the twentieth century, as vigilantism came under closer government scrutiny, *Herrenvolk* democracy retreated to marginal enclaves (though politer versions survived closer to the center). Meanwhile, the mass media continued to sanction the marriage of guns and manliness by generating a vast montage of gun-toting heroes. John Wayne was joined by Steve McQueen, Clint Eastwood, and other steely-eyed survivors in a collective exercise in gun fetishism. All that was needed for the emergence of postmodern conservatism was the sepia tinge of nostalgia.

The point is not that mass-mediated images have directly caused gun violence. It is, rather, that they have confused and obstructed debate about reasonable gun regulation. They have helped to surround guns with a halo of spurious sanctity. "In a society that regulates and registers almost every commodity," Bellesiles observes, "the gun leads a charmed life of perfect free-

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dom." The sacralization of guns involves more than clever marketing and wide availability; it is enmeshed in the mythic narrative of American manhood, where it remains impervious to fact and to logic.

Few interpreters of our culture have seen that fantasy more clearly than D.H. Lawrence, in his commentary on the mythology of Cooper's Deerslayer novels in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923). The frontiersman's rifle is a crucial adjunct to what Lawrence called "true myth ... the onward adventure of the integral soul. And this, for America, is Deerslayer.... A man who keeps his moral integrity hard and intact. An isolate, almost selfless, stoic, enduring man who lives by death, by killing, but who is pure white." Lawrence believed that this grand, rugged figure embodied "the essential American soul." Does he still? It is an awful prospect; but the question is certainly too important to be left to Beltway mythologists and postmodern conservatives. ■

The Eye's God

By JAROSLAV PELIKAN

The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm by Alain Besançon translated by Jane Marie Todd

(University of Chicago Press, 408 pp., $40)

"THOU SHALT NOT make unto thee any graven image": this unequivocal prohibition stands as a part of the Ten Commandments in every Bible, Jewish or Christian, even though it is sometimes numbered as the Second Commandment—by Judaism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, and Calvinism—and sometimes—by Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism—as a further elaboration of the First Commandment, "I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me." (These latter two traditions then have to "covet" twice.) Among those who take it as a separate commandment, Eastern Orthodox Christians have been the ones, ironically, who made images a quasi-sacramental part of their liturgical and private spirituality. They have also repeatedly been obliged, for more than thirteen centuries now, to explain this anomaly to iconoclastic critics within and beyond their own communion.

Alain Besançon, who is best known for his thoughtful works on Communist ideology and Russian culture, perhaps especially for *Les origines intellectuelles du Leninisme*, explores the philosophical and theological tour de force by which Orthodox Christianity vindicated icons as well as the repeated misgivings that have appeared in that tradition and beyond it about the legitimacy of their use. The aesthetics of Neoplatonism; the relation of the written word to the spoken word; the schism between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Western Roman Catholic Church; the Jewish, Muslim, and Calvinist suspicions of any attempt to depict the divine; and the reflections of Pascal, Kant, Matisse, and a host of other philosophers and artists—such are the diverse themes that Besançon introduces, in sometimes confusing detail, in this idiosyncratic, wide-ranging, and learned book. As a result, his central thesis (or theses) often seem less precise than his many individual historical insights and one-liners on these and a variety of other questions. He has a great talent for pithy expression: in his conclusion, for example, he observes that in its art America "was destined for the sublime, almost by nature: its nineteenth-century painters dared render its landscapes which, in the Hudson Valley and in the West, are, in fact, absolutely 'great.'"

Both Platonic philosophy and Christian theology can lead to a fundamental ambivalence toward the image. For this reason, both have provided champions of images as well as critics of images, with formidable weapons for their arsenals. "Though philosophy meant death to the old gods," Besançon quotes the epigram of Werner Jaeger, "it is itself religion." For Plato, "the nature of the divine makes the image of the divine impossible," because "the lover of beauty relies on art in taking his first steps, then abandons it. In that sense, it is accurate to say that Plato is the father of iconoclasm." Through such thinkers as Philo of Alexandria and Origen of Alexandria, the former a Hellenistic Jew and the latter a Hellenistic Christian, this Platonic rejection of the religious image has shaped the criticism of icons. And yet, as Besançon writes, "the Platonic Idea—eternal, imperishable, intelligible—can be turned against the Platonic condemnation of art. The artist is not an impotent and frivolous imitator, at one remove from reality: his mind contains the model of beauty toward which he can direct his internal gaze and thereby act as a true creator," as an analogue and even an imitation of the original (and only true) "true Creator."

FROM ITS ROOTS deep in Mosaic monotheism—the one genuinely ecumenical creed of the Church, the so-called Nicene Creed (actually the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed), begins with words based on the *Shema* of the Book of Deuteronomy, "We believe in one God"—Christianity received a profound and persistent aversion to idolatry in any form. Indeed, the very dogma of the Trinity, which superficial critics in every age have charged with contradicting biblical monotheism, was actually made necessary by the incurable habit of Christians to speak to and about Jesus as "divine," which had somehow to be squared with that monotheistic aversion to more than one God; and this led to the confession of the First Council of Nicaea in 325 that Christ the Son of God was "one in being, *homoousios*, with the Father." But "what authorized the image under the New Covenant was precisely its prohibition under the Old," because the God who prohibited images on Mount Sinai had himself, on Mount Calvary, presented mankind with the one true and *homoousios* Image of himself. This made "images of the Image" not only permissible but even obligatory.

For the Western Catholic Church, within which Besançon explicitly and consciously locates himself ("in reading Augustine, the Western European has the feeling he has come home"), the most telling justification for the use of images was the pedagogical and rhetorical one. In his celebrated letter to Serenus, written about the year 600, Pope Gregory the Great declared: "It is one thing to worship a painting, and quite another to learn from a scene represented in a painting what ought to be worshiped. For what

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writing provides for people who read, paintings provide for the illiterate who look at them, since these unlearned people see what they must imitate; paintings are books for those who do not know their letters, so that they take the place of books, especially among pagans." The apostle Paul had proclaimed, in the Epistle to the Romans, that "faith cometh by hearing," not by seeing; so that if there were to be images, they had to be placed in service to the word of God. Even a picture book was still a book. Thus in the East one spoke of writing an icon ("iconography"), not of painting an icon.

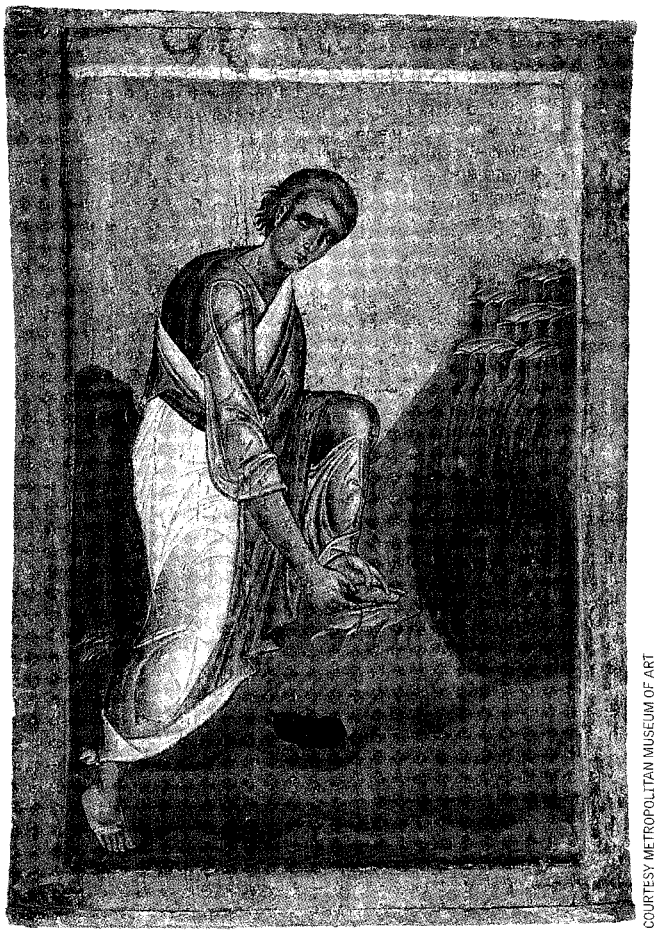
The Byzantine apologia for icons—for which, Besançon says gratefully, "my sure guide in this labyrinth has been the masterful work of Christoph von Schönborn," the distinguished Dominican scholar who is now the Cardinal Archbishop of Vienna—was formulated over a period of several centuries in a series of doctrinal affirmations beginning with John of Damascus (writing under the protection of a Muslim court), the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 (the seventh and, for the East, the final ecumenical council of the Church), and the writings of Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople and Abbot Theodore of the Monastery of Studios. It based itself not merely on pedagogy and rhetoric, but in the metaphysics of the doctrine of the Incarnation, as this had been worked out in the first six ecumenical councils.

Originally, the doctrine of the Incarnation had been used to oppose icons. In what Besançon calls "the charter of iconoclasm," Eusebius of Caesarea had asked in the fourth century, when Emperor Constantine's sister had requested from him an image of Christ, "What image of Christ are you seeking? Could it be the true and immutable, the one that possesses by nature its own characteristics, or could it be the one that [Christ] assumed for us, when he assumed the shape of the servant?" The first of these was impossible, because the nature of God was transcendent; the second was heretical, because the person of Christ was indivisible and now glorified.

But orthodoxy stood this argument on its head. For there was what might be called, borrowing Arthur Lovejoy's famous phrase, a "great chain" of images, descending hierarchically from the Son of God as the eternal Image of the Father through the images of the yet-to-be-created world already existing in the eternal mind of God, through the human nature of the Incarnate One, all the way to the icon as a representation of the events of his history and of the history of his Mother and the other saints. So it came about that, in Besançon's judgment, Eastern "Orthodoxy, purged of heresies and of iconoclasm—which had included every kind of heresy, in fact—remained firm in its faith."

One rather curious result of this difference of emphasis between the rhetorical justification of the Catholic West and the incarnational argumentation of the Orthodox East was evident, according to Besancon, in the respective treatment of the pagan gods and their images. Describing the Eastern Orthodox liturgy, with its incense and its veneration of icons, the liberal Protestant historian of dogma Adolf von Harnack once commented that this worship was being carried on just as it had been in classical pagan antiquity, except that the artistic taste had deteriorated. But Besançon points out, to the contrary, that "on holy icons, as a general rule, the old gods had disappeared. In the West, they never died."

This was, in significant measure, precisely owing to the concentration of the Latin West on pedagogy. The same Gregory the Great who wrote the canonical letter to Serenus also counseled Augustine of Canterbury and his missionary colleagues, at about the same time, that in dealing with the pagan Anglo-Saxons in England, "the idol temples of that race should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars, and place relics [of Christian saints] in them.... When this people see that their shrines are not destroyed, they will be able to banish error from their hearts and be more ready to come to the places they are familiar with, but now recognizing and worshiping the true God," making their progress toward the true faith one stage at a time. In the art and the thought of the Renaissance, according to Besançon, this permissive Western attitude toward the vestiges of paganism asserted itself with new force—except that "sometimes humanism went too far. Plato was in agreement with Moses, Socrates confirmed Jesus Christ."



COURTESY METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Icon with Moses before the Burning Bush, Byzantine, circa 1150, Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai

Still, in both East and West the suspicion that there is something wrong about the veneration of images has lingered, and steadfastly refuses to go away. In every age, the iconoclasts had no difficulty vituperating against the abuses of popular religion. Tolstoy, in whom Besançon discerns certain affinities with Plato, not only wrote the provocative and in some ways extreme little book *What Is Art?*, but also keenly observed both the sublime simplicity in icon worship (in the figure of Princess Maria in *War and Peace*, whom the writer modeled after his mother) and the idolatry into which it has all but inevitably lapsed (in several of his short stories). And Kandinsky's "Russian Revolution," as Besançon labels it, exalted abstraction over the representational character of the icon.

Yet in many respects the most hospitable ground for the iconoclastic suspicion has traditionally been in the West. Theologically, the Protestant Reformation, with its most articulate spokesman on this question being "the clearly and serenely iconoclastic" John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, broke with the pedagogical emphasis on images during the Middle Ages, in the name of the power and the authority of the word

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of God as this was communicated in Holy Scripture and in biblical preaching. Philosophically, it was Hegel who saw, perhaps more clearly than any other modern in any country, that (in the words that Besançon makes the epigraph of his book) "thought long ago stopped assigning to art the sensible representation of the divine."

And yet it is clear that even Hegel could never quite shake off what Besançon aptly terms "the nostalgia for the image." And he was not alone. Each Sunday, as I kiss the icons of Christ and of his Mother at the beginning of the Divine Liturgy, I give thanks that Orthodoxy was successful in restoring them after the ravages of iconoclasm, and in defending them against later iconoclasms, foreign and domestic. And at the same time I constantly recognize, in myself and in history, the recurring temptation of an aestheticism that can invert (and pervert) "the beauty of holiness" of the Psalmist into the holiness of beauty, into an object of worship for its own sake.

Besançon's discussion is frequently—and unnecessarily—allusive and self-referential, sometimes even self-indulgent. "I am not writing a history of art," he vigorously explains, as if the reader had the opposite impression; but a reader needs to know a great deal about the history of art to follow his arguments. Not being a historian of art either, but like Besançon a historian of ideas and doctrines, I found myself annoyed also by his habit of sometimes citing primary and secondary sources in their French translations rather than in their original editions; and this regrettable practice is then compounded by his translator, who does not always provide the reader with references to the English versions of those books when they exist, and who sometimes even translates from the French translations of works originally written in Greek or Latin. Although he admits to being daunted by "the towering cliff of patristic literature," Besançon explains and identifies fewer proper names than the lay reader might expect or even deserve. But the central issues that Besançon raises are so important, and his grasp of them is so distinctive and often so interesting, that it is well worth the sometimes strange trip. ■

Rock Bottom

By LEE SIEGEL

The Royal Family by William T. Vollmann

(Viking Press, 672 pp., $40)

DISCOVERING THE authenticity in life in the shit of life is a respectable literary tradition. Truth in extremity, truth in degradation and decay: these are old themes, and they happen also to be William Vollmann's themes, pursued by him with an awesome graphomaniacal obsessiveness in fiction and journalism through the brothels of New York and San Francisco and Bangkok, and on the battlefields of Afghanistan and Bosnia. Vollmann represents the up-to-the minute phase of a hallowed literary style. Like Louis-Ferdinand Céline with his scatological howls in his day, and William Burroughs with his heroic junkies in his, William Vollmann works the sewer romanticism of our time.

Of course, literary characters have long been descending into the depths: Odysseus, Aeneas, Lucius trapped in the hide of an ass, Dante in hell, Don Quixote lowering himself into the nightmarish Cave of Montesinos. Yet after their walk on the wild side, the heroes return to the world; they gaze once again at *il sole e le altre stelle*, as Dante says gratefully at the end of his epic. The old stories retain an eschatology of redemption, a love of the light, just as the primitive myths reaped regeneration from the nether regions. But Vollmann's sort of romanticism travels a different territory. It belongs in the category of what the philosopher Jean Wahl once called "transcendence downward." The object of transcendence downward is never to come back.

The spiritual one-way ticket characterizes romanticism's decadent stage. Nearly seventy years ago, the great Italian scholar Mario Praz dubbed this literary style "the romantic agony" in a once-famous book of the same name. The unholy modern genealogy is familiar: Sade, Byron, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Huysmans, and the other high aesthete-sinners, though by the time of Wilde and Swinburne the decadents' arsenal of cruelty had already become the stuff of parody. One English parodist rightly recognized in the *via negativa* of late romanticism "a proof of the existence of widespread contempt of the great commonplaces of life—love, marriage, and the rearing of children." A hundred years later, the assault on the middle-class comprises, in *The Royal Family*, William Vollmann's overarching theme.

If Vollman's work proves anything, it is that we are witnessing a stasis of the romantic vocabulary. Nothing has yet displaced the displacement of religion that occurred in the nineteenth century, and transformed advanced artistic taste. Over one hundred years ago, when materialism became the dominant ethos, the cries of the flesh drowned out the effusions of the soul. Baudelaire, Huysmans, and the others profited from a blaspheming energy, from the sense that, in the absence of God, sin without guilt was possible. And they were driven further into extreme experience also by the realization that sin as a terminus point was excruciating. Decadence—the thirst for sensation, the exaltation of vice, the celebration of cruelty—was the wound that romanticism opened in itself as the expression of its inability to find a plane of reality above ordinary life.

Unlike present-day decadents, though, these literary sinners did not wish to sin against the ideal of art, against beauty. Baudelaire embodied his whores and drugs and self-loathing in an incantatory classicism, and Rimbaud's "Le Bateau Ivre" unsettled the senses in an unsettled version of the alexandrine. The language of the decadents, the symbolists, the aesthetes may have expressed horrors, but the language was beautiful. The language was in contention with its content. In "The Painter of Modern Life," Baudelaire wrote that "beauty is made up of an eternal, invariable element ... and of a relative circumstantial element, which will be, if you like, whether severally or all at once, the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions." The task of the artist was to "distill the eternal from the transitory," the classical task.

If the means of aesthetic sin have changed, so has its context. For over a century now, the middle class has been conscientiously assimilating all the artistic indictments of itself. The assaults on the middle class unwittingly supply an outlet for the middle class's restlessness; and as we grow more prosperous and expansive and inventive, our restlessness embraces more and more previously unacceptable experience. All kinds of outrage are now respectable. There is a *bateau ivre* in every suburban garage. Needless to say, it is still possible—very possible—to be shocked by raw, painful experience. A doctor's grave

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diagnosis shocks. But it is simply not possible to be shocked by art that intends to "shock" by replacing genuinely shocking experience with the simulated and pleasurable sensation of being shocked. It is not possible to be shocked by art that competes with experience instead of transforming it or making sense of it.

So what is a latter-day decadent to do? What decadents have always done: make something that is beautiful, because beauty is a variety of radicalism, a permanent instrument of protest against the smug utilitarian ethos of middle-class life. By beautiful, I do not mean fiction that sidesteps the destructive element. I mean fiction that does not allow life's horror to wither on the page as an isolated fact, as in reportage—or as in the literature of shock, which is preeningly conscious of its very literal intent. I mean fiction that presents horror, ugliness, and degradation with absolute attention to imaginative complexities; fiction that does not calculatingly anticipate a reader's or an editor's or a reviewer's response; fiction that does not congratulate itself on its perversions; fiction that has nothing to do with the self-interest of our comfortable middle-class existence. The triumph of middle-class values is a blessing on politics and society, but it is a curse on culture.

IN *THE ROYAL FAMILY*, William Vollmann despises—and despises and despises—the middle class. If only he had managed to pull art out of his aversion.

Like some earlier fiction and nonfiction by Vollmann, his new novel looks for redemption among whores, in particular among a group of prostitutes in San Francisco's Tenderloin district. Henry Tyler is a private eye in San Francisco, a down-on-his-luck sadsack hired by a mysterious businessman named Brady to track down the leader of a stable of streetwalkers who is known as the Queen of the Whores. Yet his plunge into "the life" begins to agitate Tyler because he happens to be romantically obsessed with Irene, the Korean-American wife of John, Tyler's brother.

Though devoted to her husband, Irene is unhappy in her marriage to John, a cynical and cold-hearted corporate lawyer. He is mostly indifferent to her, concerned as he is with accumulating money and enlarging his social status; John, you see, is the very spirit of middle-class callousness. Tyler's attentions to Irene come as a relief, and she does little to discourage him, remaining free of guilt while Tyler suffers from an anguished conscience and a frustrated libido.

Despite the fact that he barely manages to make a living, Tyler grows suspicious of Brady's motives for finding the Queen of the Whores and begins to do his job less and less vigilantly. His incompetence exasperates Brady, who fires him. Pushed further into despair by his ill-starred passion for Irene, Tyler continues his search for the Queen, convinced that she plays a role in the consummation of his destiny. For Tyler realizes, like a century of rebels from Hernani to Holden Caulfield, that he is a doomed man, a Cain.

Indeed, Tyler actually refers to himself as Cain. So does his author, who calls an early chapter "The Mark of Cain" and describes the prostitutes as "Canaanites." (The big joke is in fact incoherent: Cain had nothing whatever to do with Canaanites, except that in English the words sound similar.) Sometimes the prostitutes also refer to themselves as Cain—"And I keep it hidden with my Mark of Cain"—much as if they had studied Vollmann's novel in a graduate seminar on transgression. Vollmann himself likes to outrage religion from time to time by informing us that the forces of middle-class propriety are like the "Chosen People" who destroyed his beloved Canaanites. Several of the evil characters in his novel happen to be Jews, such as Domino, the sole wicked prostitute, whose real name is Sylvia Fine.

But enough about the Jews. One day Irene kills herself, partly because she has gotten pregnant in response to her parents' wishes and neither she nor John feels comfortable about the prospect of a child. Guilt consumes Tyler, and he becomes more and more relentless in his search for the Queen. Finally he locates her, and becomes the Queen's lover, and joins her gang. He consorts with the Queen's whores, and also with a child-molester named Dan Smooth—another beloved Canaanite—who is under the special protection of the police as an informer. (The police are also hypocrites, like John.)

The novel follows Tyler's descent into sexual degradation as the Queen initiates him by spitting and then urinating into his mouth. His initiation continues through several sexual encounters, as the Queen, a middle-aged black woman, dominates him with varying degrees of sadism. Vollmann juxtaposes this honest sadism with the cruelty of Brady, a respectable businessman who would not acknowledge his cruelty. As Tyler witnesses the brutality of the prostitutes' lives, we also get a subplot involving his brother John's relationship with Celia, a young professional woman with whom he was having an affair while still married to Irene.

Vollmann draws many homiletical parallels between the harsh exchanges and commodifications that rule the prostitutes' lives and John and Celia's hypocrisy, and John and Celia's pursuit of ego-satisfaction under the guise of love, and John and Celia's quest for material fulfillment. The writer's touch could not be any heavier. John, after all, is a name that exudes middle-class stability and respectability, but it is also the term for a man who uses the services of prostitutes. And so John, the paragon of middle-class respectability, is the paragon of middle-class vice. Just in case you missed the point.

VOLLMANN ALSO SPINS out a comparison between the sexual debasement that Tyler enjoys with the Queen, his passion for Irene, and Irene's sexual relationship with John. He wants to convey a naked revelation: that getting spit at, and pissed on, and shat on, is true and good because it is the honest expression of a desire that wishes to express itself in such a way. Tyler, by contrast, has been lying to himself about the nature of his feelings for Irene. What he thinks is ardor and sincerity is really raw desire. Tyler keeps waking up throughout the novel with "the taste of Irene's cunt in his mouth."

The Queen wants to teach Tyler a fundamental lesson: plain old sexual desire is at the heart of what gets called love. Vollmann wants us to know that the true aberration lies in Irene and John's stifling, sexless marriage, which prevents two true lovers—Irene and Tyler—from being united, and crushes a natural human impulse with the bourgeois fabrication of guilt. In *The Royal Family*, a forbidden experience is always made to resemble a respectable experience, so that the former might teach the latter a lesson; the "deviant" is always superior to the "normal."

Vollmann appears to think that this is shocking, and also original. We meet John and Henry's mother, whose suburban circle is devoted to acquisition and indifferent to the inner sadness of the people around them. They are even worse than prostitutes, Vollmann repeatedly implies, because the brutality and the melancholy of life is what drove the whores into their profession, and what often makes them decent to one another and also profoundly sensitive to the fact of death. (The hooker as sibyl: it is hard to believe that somebody is still peddling this nonsense.) At Irene's funeral, by contrast, John's relatives are more interested in keeping up appearances than in the woman who has died. They talk a lot about things; they are chronic acquirers in a materialistic society that hypocritically condemns the frank materialism of the flesh. Vollmann also intends this disclosure to be shocking and the last word on human relations.

As all of this is taking place—I will understand if you want to stop here and run an errand—Vollmann rolls out an-

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other sub-plot. This involves Brady's nefarious entrepreneurial plans. Brady wants to create in Las Vegas an extravagant mecca of adult entertainment that he calls Feminine Circus. Feminine Circus will satisfy the basest, most sadistic male desires, but it will pretend that its gratifications are virtual, that they are digitally composed by a computer. One of its most popular attractions promises to be a collection of young retarded girls, whom Brady makes available to be beaten, raped, and killed.

By the end of the novel, Brady has established his new enterprise, but only after capturing and destroying the good-hearted Queen and her wise and noble whores under the guise of an anti-prostitution campaign, since the Queen's protectiveness toward her girls threatened to keep them out of Brady's clutches. The "royal family" is thus ruined by its inauthentic commercial simulacrum. Honest descent into lust is replaced by Brady's dishonest set of lies: he lies to his clients about the nature of their gratifications; they lie to themselves about the nature of their gratifications; the local authorities which allow Brady to operate Feminine Circus lie to themselves about what Brady is really doing. Against these convoluted prevarications, Vollmann sets the honest, open practices of the whores, and Dan Smooth's honest, open practice of beating, raping, and destroying young, retarded girls, who, Vollmann informs us, enjoy his attentions.

With the destruction of the "royal family," Tyler gives up his worldly belongings and becomes first homeless, and then a hobo riding the rails. He descends downward, towards some sort of sainthood. And John has a fling with the evil whore Domino, who has taken over the remnants of the Queen's band. But this motion toward whoredom is purely lateral, since John has lived in bad faith and ends up with a figure of bad faith. After all, he has been working on contracts with Brady the whole time.

In nearly seven hundred pages of densely packed print, Vollmann wishes to demonstrate—a hundred years after Rimbaud, thirty years after The Doors—the spiritual heroism of decadence. Most of all he wishes to show, through the subplot of Brady and the Feminine Circus, that candor about the basest aspects of life removes the slur of baseness from them, and that the lack of candor about basic human desires lies at the core of the commercialism that is killing us. Never mind that this is also the message of most "innovative" television series, which appear several times every season, and nearly all "serious" Hollywood movies, which come out about every other week.

If extreme experience was all it took to make genuine art, then we should dismantle all the creative-writing programs in the country and put maximum security prisons in their place. Vollmann is a connoisseur of extreme experiences of the lowering kind, and he has been milking them in book after book for years. (He documented his most famous one in an article for Bob Guccione's *Spin* magazine, in which Vollmann recounted how he rescued a young Thai girl from a brothel in Bangkok and set her up, with Guccione's money, in a sanctuary.) But he has not found an imaginative form in which to embody his exciting escapades. Perhaps this is why he writes so much. His books are so long because he has so little to say.

Vollmann's language is crushingly ugly—I mean ugly in the bad sense. In his acknowledgments, Vollmann explains that he based the novel on his experiences among San Francisco's prostitutes, and his language seems at war with a plot weighed down by unaccommodated facts. Vollmann writes like an adolescent who has just learned that he can use words as instruments of fantasy and aggression.

> His penis, speckled and frolicksome like an otter, would soon play no more. He'd perfume it only with sacrilege.

> Set in Antarctica, this novel might conceivably scrape by without any human characters whatsoever, and I could pad out chapter after chapter with descriptions of the most delicious icebergs. But here in California we must make do with human beings, who comprise as strange a breed as the mumbling cab drivers of Philadelphia. Moreover, those human beings form, deform and dissolve their attachments more or less unmediated by those family and political difficulties which make any success all the more fulfilling; eating pomegranates might not be half so pleasant, if it weren't so much trouble to pick out the seeds.

> Growing up in hot California towns, our hero didn't yet know himself because trees hung heavy and silent, obscuring the children from their shadows; overhanging roofs nipped the light like hatched clamshells, eating children every evening when the bicycles came home. He and his best friend used to masturbate together at his house or his best friend's house because that was how soldiers in love's fight impelled each other, lying side by side in the stench of suspended breathing, not yet driven to attack for the booty of breasts and soft thighs…

> Domino's hand on her vulva felt as scorching as one of those dark boxcars sitting in the hot California sun.

> She drove over squashed roadkills sticky and grey; she devoured the plastic cow on the roof of the steakhouse and shat it out through the rear view mirror and then they were in Pennsylvania.

> They were going to the opera… the other operagoers filed in, spectacles in hand or on their noses, covering their mouths, crying: Nice to see you!—which meant: Nice for you to see me!

> … the big-buttocked matrons at Macy's stalking down bargains, lonely old ladies inspecting tag after tag, letting the fabric drift through their fingers… while from ceiling speakers so-called "easy listening" music fell like a mist of insecticide, not quite drowning out the real music of cash registers… This was the kind of place in which, like an elf-queen's cave, one spent a minute and lost a life. By some cheerfully hypocritical caprice, the addictions that it sold were all legal…

Once upon a time, transgression was real. Céline and Lawrence and Woolf were enraged at a civilization that could send hundreds of thousands of men to their deaths in the name of empty, fluttering pieties about truth, honor and loyalty. But Vollmann is furious at *retail*.

Note, too, his observation about the opera. It represents the full measure of Vollmann's insight into social pretense and hypocrisy. In the realm of psychological truth, which is one dimension of Vollman's purported realm, his puerility regularly outdoes itself. Here he describes John's first meeting with Celia's family:

> How much vacation did you say you had? John asked Celia's brother.
>
> Six weeks.
>
> Interesting.
>
> *Are* you interested? the brother said challengingly.
>
> Very interested, said John. I have four weeks, but I never get to take it.
>
> I heard that Sis completely arranges her vacation time around you, and that's why we hardly ever get to see her. Is that true?
>
> Why don't you ask her? was John's curt reply.
>
> John, this wine looks extremely expensive, Celia's mother said. Are you sure we're worth it?
>
> Positive, said John.
>
> I don't think I've ever seen this brand. Where does it come from? Is it French?
>
> Well, there's the label. Do you see it? It's in French, so—

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John, don't!

Don't what, Ceel? Your mother asked me a question, and I not only answered her, I proved my case. What's wrong with that? Are you going to tell me I was patronizing?

This is a shrewd, successful middle-aged litigator and his urbane, professional, middle-aged girlfriend! Vollmann might be brave on the battlefield, but he is a coward in the living room.

Unlike the tradition of downward transcending writers from Villon to Burroughs, Vollmann does not even have a firm hold on his native language. He writes with the incorrect super-formality of people who are unsure of whether they are speaking correctly. He misuses the subjunctive, for example, time and time again, for no apparent reason, since the mistakes occur in passages involving nearly all the novel's central characters, and in a variety of situations:

Somebody wanted him to spy on her husband to see if he were being unfaithful.

Sometimes he wondered if his brother were angry at him...

He drove up to North Beach to see if Irene's window were still lit.

She asked whether he were married.

John had never entirely made up his mind whether dress circle were the best value...

And yet there is something right about Vollmann's stubbornly erroneous use of the subjunctive mood. The subjunctive indicates, or should indicate, an impossible situation in contrast to a possible one. But Vollmann, the celebrated teller of naked truths, has no respect for imaginative reality. He never forgets himself; he keeps shifting his attention from the object of his imagination to himself or his language, and admiring himself for his own inventions. And his literary voice is starkly at odds with his theme. If authenticity dwells in the lowest depths of life, then the language in which this sentiment is expressed cannot revel in its own sanitized literary qualities, as Vollmann's does. He is not nearly as raw as he thinks he is.

Vollmann's themes themselves are as disheveled as his levels of artifice. He seems to assert the authenticity of debasement, yet the woman who administers degradation to Tyler—the Queen—is a fine and generous person who possesses the middle-class qualities of decency and familial instinct that Vollmann seems to detest. Why doesn't he send Tyler on a downward odyssey, and put him in with some pimps who don't have a noble nature? Surely the sewer is not *all* sweetness and light.

Then, too, if commerce's similarity to prostitution and drug addiction discredits, in Vollmann's eyes, the respectability of commerce, he really shouldn't hate commerce so much. By his novel's logic, all Macy's would have to do to earn Vollmann's respect is to start training its salespeople to introduce themselves to their customers as whores. All Brady would have to do to win a position as the hero of Vollmann's next fearless novel is to tell the truth about his retarded girls, and then he could go on murdering them for profit.

But Vollmann is too prissy and self-righteous—too bourgeois—about the importance of being honest to stop and think about why being honest is more important than being good, or being sane. He is still trapped in the fantasy stage of little boys who dream at night of faraway, violent adventures. Whores have hearts of gold, and gold has the heart of a whore: a more hackneyed and time-tested theme could not be devised. With the rusty depredations of William Vollmann, transcendence downward has hit bottom. ■

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WASHINGTON DIARIST

Carvin' The Bird

WHO'S AFRAID OF WYNton Marsalis? Except for people with ears and brains, everybody. Or so it would appear from the reception of Ken Burns's stupefying *Jazz*, for which Marsalis served as "senior creative consultant" and as senior on-camera exegete. In a symposium in the Arts and Leisure section of *The New York Times*, the centrality of Marsalis in Burns's epic provokes resentment from a jazz historian ("with Wynton Marsalis arriving like a jazz Dalai Lama, after the deaths of Ellington and Armstrong"), and "angry blues" from the trumpeter Jon Faddis, who is incensed that the "philosophy" of Marsalis is "presented as fact, rather than opinion or interpretation." Faddis is also "angry that the music from 1961 until now was given only one episode of two hours": this is the old complaint about the neoclassicism of Marsalis and its allegedly reactionary character. Meanwhile *The Weekly Standard* reached all the way to *The Washington Times* to find someone to accuse Marsalis of racism—pardon me, of "racialism." The writer, who seems to think that Mel Powell was the equal of Thelonious Monk, cites the "searing" opinion of the freelance philistine Terry Teachout that Marsalis propounds "an ideology in which race is a primary factor in the making of aesthetic judgments," and reports that "the racialist ideology has played out in a series of jazz programs [at Lincoln Center] based on the work of black players, composers, and arrangers."

JAZZ PROGRAMS BASED ON THE work of black players, composers, and arrangers? Imagine! In truth, the attempt in recent years to deny African Americans pride of place in the evolution of jazz has been stupid and ugly, Bix and Benny and the rest notwithstanding. And the imputation of racialist standards to Marsalis's view of jazz is a willful misrepresentation of his music and his institution. In this regard, his livid brothers on the left understand him better than his livid brothers on the right. It is precisely because he has championed an aesthetic point of regard toward jazz—as a serious art that is pledged, like all serious art, to the beauty of structure and the morality of structure—that Marsalis has not pioneered a reconsideration of the achievement of Albert Ayler. Unlike the downtown expressionists, Coltrane's idiot children, Marsalis does not consider feeling the enemy of form. But formalism is a variety of universalism. It establishes itself at the highest level of generality: at the level of the human. For this reason, an aesthete who is a racialist is a bad aesthete, but an aesthete who is a democrat is a good aesthete, and Marsalis is one of the most accomplished aesthetes of his time. "God don't like ugly," he wrote in *Blood on the Fields*. Maybe God don't like *The Weekly Standard*.

IS IT REALLY CONTROVERSIAL TO SUGgest that jazz is historically more black than white but spiritually neither black nor white; that personal expression is the beginning but not the end of art; that spontaneity is hardly a promise of truth; that improvisation is an activity of the intellect; and that the alto playing of John Zorn represents a falling off from the alto playing of Johnny Hodges and Lee Konitz and Jackie McLean and Ornette Coleman? But fall off, I say, fall off. This is a free country, and everybody can produce any noise that he wishes to produce. Still, the noises will be judged, because judging is what minds do. From the standpoint of pleasure, the judgment will not be severe: my pleasure is not more valuable than your pleasure. Indeed, I will confess gladly to the pleasure that Lester Bowie's version of "The Great Pretender" brings me. But I will not mistake my emotional attachment to that slumming masterpiece for its musical excellence. For decades Chet Baker's singing has furnished the soundtrack for my imperfect man's heart, but I will concede that, artistically speaking, it is just junk that I love. Distinctions of quality may be nothing more than classifications of delight, but still they must be maintained. And no apology need be offered for the belief that the art that asks more of you is the art that should be more precious to you. We are here for more than fun.

IN BURNS'S 19 HOURS OF HOLLOW hagiographies, Marsalis stands out like a soloist whose rhythm section is lost somewhere behind him. His is the only analytical voice in this interminable starstruck rhapsody. (His little lesson about "Epistrophy" alone is worth a sea of sepia.) Sure, there are good things on these tapes: I will not soon forget the sight of Coleman Hawkins watching Monk sublimely poke the piano; or of the battered and lovely Lester Young stepping up to play a pellucid chorus of "Fine and Mellow" before the battered and lovely Billie Holiday; or of Soupy Sales introducing Clifford Brown. But Burns suffocates the jazz tradition in his superlatives. He deadens everything with his wonder. He has come to be ravished. A helpless hero-worshiper, his success threatens to make hero worship into a respectable historical standpoint. It is easy to see why Burns flourishes in this culture of worthless admiration. He is really just a fan: Bob Costas with an NEA grant.

IN THE BOOK THAT ACCOMPANIES *Jazz*, Burns admits that "when I began the project, I had perhaps two jazz records in my fairly large music collection," and it shows. The music in these programs is mainly the background for its edifying narrative; I do not remember a single piece that Burns allows to be given in its entirety. Alas, you cannot have the mystic chords of memory unless you have the chords. So piety stands in for comprehension, and the music is made into a parable of everything good and beautiful and true. Jazz is freedom, love, joy, sorrow, creation, destruction, risk, responsibility, sex, friendship, the body, the soul. Burns's series is another document in the religion of jazz, which is a fine bulwark against the experience of jazz. After eight hours or so of these doxologies, I wanted to reach for Journey's greatest hits, for anything with the integrity of being only what it is.

BUT JAZZ FOR BURNS IS, ABOVE ALL, America. This accounts for the vaguely official tone of Burns's script. This is the story of our nation told by a national treasure. "In *Jazz*," he says, "we complete our trilogy on American life," after *The Civil War* and *Baseball*. His trilogy on race in American life, he should have said. In any event, Burns finds "in the music's lines and phrases and riffs . . . not only a meditation on American creativity, but a joyous and sublime celebration of its redemptive future possibilities. . . . [J]azz has kept the American message alive." There are many such homilies. They sound rather like the citations on presidential medals. There is also too much celebration in *Jazz*. For a fearful quantity of pain, individual and social, went into the making of this music. Burns is not comfortable with pain. He turns it into tragedy, which is the condition of triumph. Jim Crow was terrible, but here is Armstrong; dope was terrible, but here is Parker. Burns makes you almost grateful for their adversity, which is indecent. The happiness of sad people is not so easily grasped. Jazz is the sound of stoicism, and it, too, is not so easily grasped. There are secrets even in the swing.

LEON WIESELTIER

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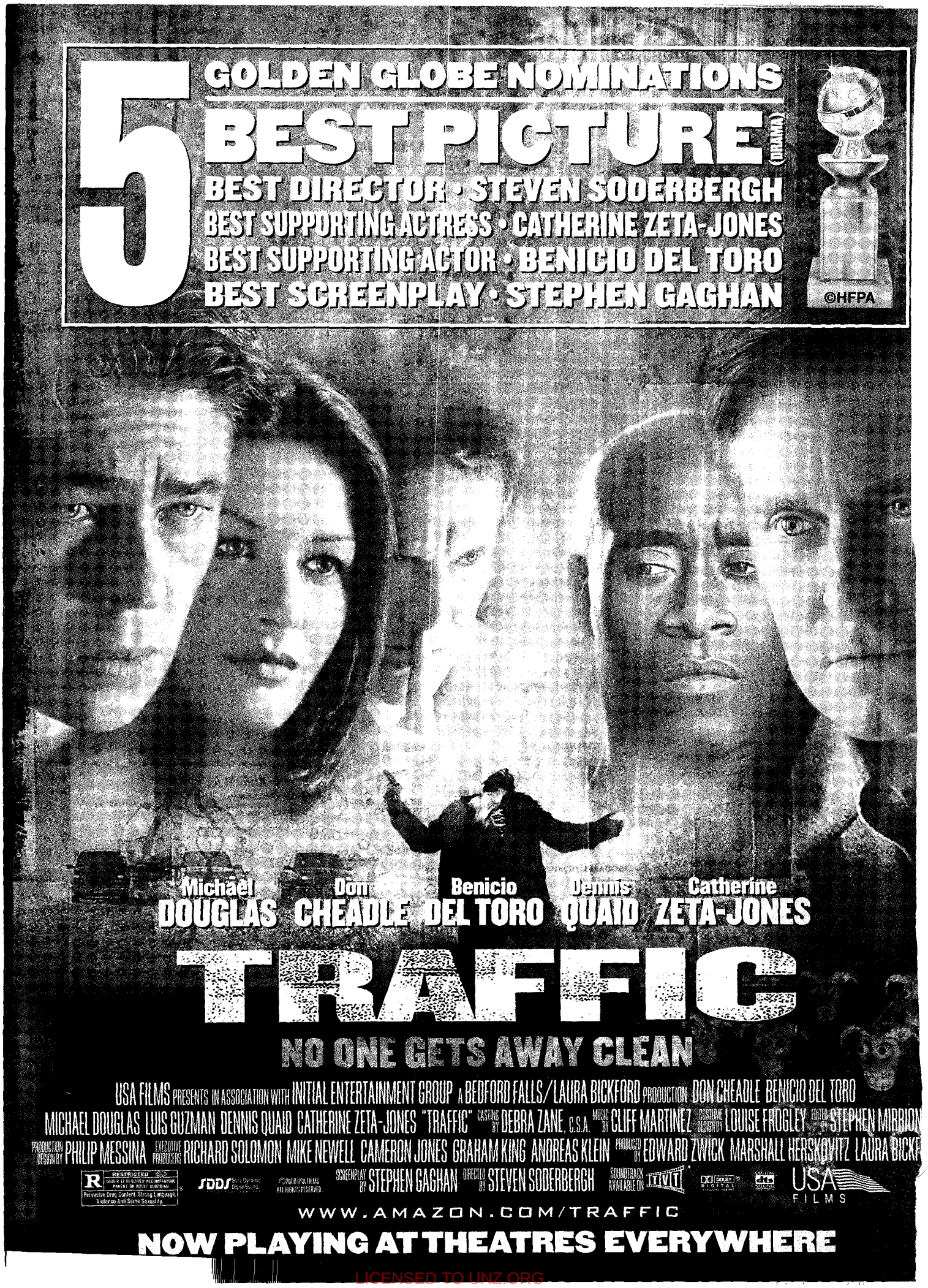

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